UNKNOWN Worlds

10

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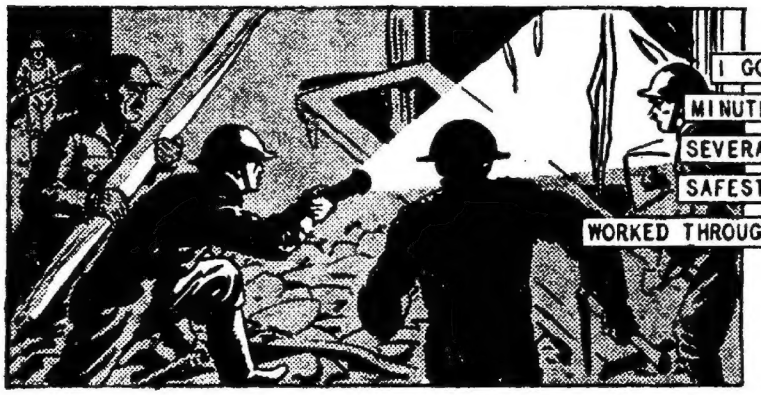

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Assistant Editor

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Illustrations by: Kolliker, Kramer, Smith and Williams

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE OCTOBER 22nd 25c PER COPY

Printed in the U.S.A.

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, 11, N. Y.

"—In Small Boxes"

The government has asked still deeper cuts in paper consumption, and, naturally, Street & Smith will comply. Unknown Worlds has already made one cut; beginning with our next issue, a further cut will be made—but a cut that will, I think, be in many ways advantageous rather than otherwise. I know I'll be interested in the results; I think you will, too.

Briefly, the next Unknown Worlds will be approximately the pocket-book size. It will continue to contain one hundred sixty pages, and, though the pages will be appreciably smaller, the total volume of text material contained will—we estimate—be very nearly the same. It may be a few thousand words less; or a few thousand words more. We have had no experience with this size, naturally, so it must remain a guess on our part.

How could we get more material in fewer pages? We won't—there will be a good many square inches less, obviously. But the advertisements, not the text, will take the cut. There will be no advertisements in the December Unknown Worlds.

A further compactness will result from the use of a different printing process. The modern high-speed rotary press is an incredible triumph of mechanical engineering; watching one in operation you tend toward the conviction that two bodies *can* occupy the same space at the same time, if they just do it quickly enough. One prize gadget is an obviously impossible contraption that is known as the "flying paster." When the end of a roll of newsprint paper is reached, the beginning of the next must be pasted on. The paper runs through one of the big presses at about nine hundred feet per minute; the "flying paster" performs the obviously impossible—it neatly pastes the end of the exhausted roll to the beginning of the new one while the press is in full flight. It's one of a number of rather startling devices making a modern high-speed press.

But a high-speed press simply cannot, in its swift inking of the flying paper, produce the deep-black, solid impression, the clean-cut black type of the older, slower presses.

The new Unknown Worlds will be printed on a book-press type machine; the type will be cleaner, blacker, easier to read, so that a somewhat smaller type face can be used with perfect clarity.

The binding machine which has been somewhat delayed in arrival is now available; the new Unknown Worlds will have a book-type binding that anchors the pages so firmly that the page tears across before the fastening at the binding lets go. Further, it will open out flat; it will no longer battle stubbornly to close up with a snap when released for a moment.

The idea of further reduction in size was not originally ours—but I think the results will be decidedly an improvement on every count. Be sure to take a look at that December issue and see!

And—be sure to arrange with one particular news dealer to have it, if you possibly can. Another way we're saving paper is reducing the number of copies distributed. If a news dealer returns unsold copies at the end of the sales period, there won't be as many copies delivered to him the next time. Buying regularly from one dealer helps us save paper, and assures you you'll get your copy.

THE EDITOR.

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The Book of Ptath

by A. E. van Vogt

He was an American tank corps officer—and an instant later he was Ptath, God-King of Gonwonlane, two hundred million years hence, master of a hundred billion subjects. But pawn of a ruthless, vicious queen!

Illustrated by Kramer.

I.

He was Ptath. Not that he thought of his name. It was simply there, a part of him, like his body and his arms and legs, like the ground over which he walked.

No, that last was wrong. The ground was not of him. There was a relation, of course, a little puzzling. He, Ptath, walking on ground, walking, walking—to Ptath. Returning to the city of Ptath, capital of his empire of Gonwonlane after an absence.

That much was clear, accepted without thought, without even awareness of thought. And it was immeasurably important. He felt the tugging urgency of it in the way his nerves stayed tense, and in the way he kept quickening his pace to see whether the next bend in the river would make it possible for him to turn westward.

To the west was a vast spread of grass, trees and blue-misted hills, and somewhere beyond the hills his destination. With a gathering annoyance, he stared down at the river that barred his way.

It had kept winding, twisting back on itself, as he walked, forcing him time and again literally to retrace his footsteps. At first that hadn't seemed to matter.

Now it did.

With all his heart and all his dim consciousness, he longed to be rushing toward those western hills, laughing, shouting in his glee for what he would find there.

Just what he would find wasn't completely certain. Ptath returning to his people from somewhere. What were those people like? What was Gonwonlane like? He couldn't remember. He strained with his mind, for the answer seemed to quiver tantalizingly just beyond reach of his consciousness, a full, rich, glorious answer, alive with dynamic, hidden wonders.

Cross the river, cross the river—the river. The thought hammered in his mind. Twice, he stepped down into the shallow wetness nearest the shore; and each time drew back, offended, repelled by the alienness.

The hard problem involved brought the first pain of purposeful thought that

he had known since he came out of blackness.

In a dumb bewilderment he turned his gaze toward the hills that lay low on the horizon to the south, and east, and north. They looked exactly the same—almost—as the hills to the west, with one vital difference: *He* wasn't interested in them.

They were unimportant. There was nothing there. Whereas to the west—

Quite suddenly he knew that he must go, river or no river. Nothing could stop him.

The purpose was like a wind, a storm that raged in ultimate fury inside him. On, on, across the river. A world of glory beckoned. The picture was utterly unclear and incomplete, but it brought inchoate joy, a very frenzy of desire.

He stepped down into the water, shrank a little; and then waded unheeding into the dark, swirling current.

The river tugged at him, and the queer impression came that it was alive like himself. It, too, moved over the land, and was not a part of the land. Or was it? Was this—

His hard train of thought ended as he stepped into a deep hole. The water crowded hungrily over his chin, tasted flat and lukewarm in his mouth.

The purest agony stabbed through his chest. He was struggling, smashing at the yielding liquid with his hands. Abruptly, blindly, he was back on higher ground. The racking cough ceased its efforts to tear him to bits.

He stood breast deep, scowling at the water that had attacked him. There was no fear, no sense that here was a restricted zone, simply dislike, and a conviction that he had been treated unfairly.

He wanted to go to the hills, and the river was trying to stop him. Would he let it? No. If pain there must be; so be it. He stepped forward.

This time, grimly, he ignored the piercing agony in his chest and walked on, straight through the liquid darkness that engulfed him. And, after a moment, as if realizing its defeat, the pain went away.

The water kept pushing at him, pulling his feet off the soft muddy bottom, but that was all right because each time his head would bob out of the water; and so he could see that he was making progress.

The twisting chest pain came back with a harsh blast on blast of coughing, as he emerged finally into shallower water. Water sprayed from his lips. He coughed and retched until tears blurred his vision, and for a while he lay contorted on the grassy bank, sick and furious, but with a developing awareness of victory.

The paroxysm ended. He climbed to his feet, and for a long minute stood staring at the dark, rushing stream. He turned away finally, grimly conscious of one thing:

He didn't like water.

The road puzzled him when he came to it. It stretched in an almost straight line toward the western horizon; and its very uniformity gave it a character.

It was obvious that, like himself, it had a purpose, except that it wasn't actively going anywhere. It just lay there, a part of the ground—no, that didn't seem quite right. He tried to think of it as a river that was not moving, but he felt no sense of repulsion, no dislike; and when he stepped on it he didn't sink into it.

A sound drew him out of his intense effort at thought. It came from the north where the road wound into sight from behind a tree-covered hill. For an instant he saw nothing. He was about to return to his examination of the road, when the thing walked into sight.

Part of the thing's body was like his own. That part had arms, legs, body, and head, almost exactly as he had, except that its face was white but the rest was mostly dark in color. There the resemblance ended.

Below the curious image of himself was a wooden thing with wheels; and in

front of *that* a sleek, scarlet, four-legged thing with one horn sticking out of the center of its head.

In a maze of interest, Ptath walked toward the creature. It did not occur to him to walk on the side of the road. He moved straight toward the beast, eyes wide, mind grasping at details. He heard the top part of the thing yell at him; and then the nose with the horn on it caught him in the chest. The animal stopped.

Ptath picked himself off the gravel, angrily. The man part of the creature was still yelling at him; and it wasn't that he didn't understand. It was simply that he was so intent that it was a long moment before he could detach his attention from the portion of the monster that had knocked him down to the portion that was shouting.

He gaped in astonishment. The thing was standing up, shaking its arms at him. *It wasn't attached.* Like himself, it was separate, different. He heard it say:

"What's the matter with you, walking right into my dottle? Are you sick? What's the idea of wandering around here naked? Do you want the soldiers of the goddess to see you?"

There was too much meaning, too many words piling one on top of another. His anger faded before his intense effort to bring all the words together into one whole. But it wouldn't go that way.

"Matter?" he repeated finally. "Sick and—"

He saw that the man was staring at him curiously. "Say," the fellow said slowly, "you are sick. You'd better climb up here beside me, and I'll take you to the temple at Linn. It's only five kanbs away; and they'll feed you and give you medical attention there. Here, I'll come down and give you a hand up."

In a minute they were moving. The wheels went around and around; and the legs of the front part of the thing moved backward and forward in a steady rhythm. He saw how the reins held in the man's fingers controlled the beast and— Beside him, the man said:

"What happened to your clothes?"

Ptath drew himself from his fascinated contemplation of the moving dottle. "Clothes?" he said curiously.

"Sure." The man stared at him. "By the zard of Accadistran, you mean to say you don't know you're naked. Looks like amnesia to me."

Ptath shifted uneasily. There was a quality in the fellow's tone that he didn't like, a suggestion that something was wrong with him, *him*. He glared the beginning of anger, and snapped loudly:

"Naked! Clothes!"

"Don't get excited." The man's voice sounded startled; there was an uncertain light in his eyes. He said hastily: "Look—clothes, like this!"

He fumbled at his own rough coat, held up an edge of it; and that was ultimately astounding. Rage evaporated out of Ptath, as if it had never existed. He stared at the man, trying to comprehend that the fellow was not really dark in color, but that a dark something *covered* him. In a genuine flutter of excitement he snatched at the coat and drew it up near his eyes the better to examine it.

There was a tearing sound. A whole section of the hard cloth came partially free in his fingers.

The man let out a yell: "Hey, what in—"

Ptath turned a puzzled gaze on the fellow. The thought in his mind was that this creature who made so much noise wanted him to stop looking at the coat. Abruptly, impatient, he shoved the torn section back to the other.

It didn't seem to be enough. The man's eyes were narrowed, his lips twisted; the man's voice said harshly:

"You ripped that cloth as if it was so much paper. You're not sick. Y-you're—"

Decision hardened his face. His hands jerked up, shoved once, furiously. There could be no resisting an action that had no meaning till it was

over. Ptath struck the ground with a jar.

He was too angry to be aware of pain. With a grunt he jumped to his feet and saw that the cart was moving rapidly along the road to the west. The one-horned dottle was running in great, galloping strides. And the man was standing in the cart, lashing at the animal's back with the reins.

He trudged on; and after a while there was a thought in his head, a thought— It would be pleasant to ride on the cart to where he was going, all the way to Ptath.

It was a long time after that that the great beasts appeared on the road far ahead. He watched them and felt his first tightening interest as he saw that men were on their backs. The trick, of course, was to get up beside the rider, then shove him off fast. And ride rapidly away down the road.

He waited, trembling a little in his eagerness. Puzzlement came only when the beasts, four of them, were near.

They were bigger than he had thought. They towered. They were twice as tall as he was, and massively built. Their necks were long, yellow in color, and supported small, wicked-looking, three-horned heads. Their bodies were green, their long, tapering tails a bluish violet. They pounded up swiftly and reared to a halt in a cloud of dust.

"That's him all right," said one of the men. "The farmer described him exactly."

"Fine-looking chap," a second said. "Just how are we going to handle him?"

A third frowned. "I've seen him somewhere. I'm sure of it. Can't just place him though."

They had come for him because somebody had described him to them. Somebody? The man with the dottle, of course; his enemy. The why of it was beyond comprehension, but it only stiffened his determination. The question, however, was—how?

The long, sloping tail offered the best method of climbing, but that way the rider would know his purpose. Actually, the best method was a variation of the one the man had used on him.

He said: "Will you help me up? It is only five kanbs to Linn, and they will feed me at the temple there and give me medical attention. Come down and give me a hand up. I am sick and have no clothes."

It sounded convincing in his own ears. He waited, watching their reaction, icily alert to every word and gesture, noting phrases for future study, bleak with his purpose.

He saw the men look at each other; then they laughed softly. Finally, one said tolerantly:

"Sure, fellow, we'll give you a lift. That's what we're here for."

Another man said: "You've got your distances slightly mixed, stranger. Linn is not five kanbs away. It's three kanbs, over that hill to the west, down into the valley and beyond the forest."

The man laughed. "You're lucky you turned out to be harmless. We thought it was some rebel stunt. Throw him the clothes we brought along, Dallird."

A bundle landed in the grass beside the road. Ptath fumbled at it curiously, laid each piece out on the green, studying from the corners of his eyes the way the men were dressed.

There were a few extras in the bundle which he examined briefly, and finally tossed aside as unnecessary. He saw that the men were watching him with wide grins. One exploded abruptly:

"You stupid idiot, don't you know anything about clothes! Look, that's underclothing. It goes on underneath. You put it on first."

Ptath's mind was quicker now. There were more facts in it from which to build conclusions. In a flash of understanding he grasped at the words, and in two minutes was dressed. He walked onto the road, held up his hand to the

man, Dallird, who had thrown the clothes.

"Up," he said, "help me up."

The version of his plan that had suddenly occurred to him was as simple as it was effective. The man reached down, said:

"Take my hand and grab hold of the saddle."

That was easy; it was all easy. Ptath pulled himself up with one effortless contraction of the muscles of one arm. With the other he jerked at the man's hand.

The fellow yelped shrilly as he soared out of his saddle. He landed partly on his knees, partly on his face. He was crouching there, groaning and cursing, as Ptath pulled himself firmly into the saddle, caught the reins, wheeled the animal toward the west and beat at it with the reins as it ran, just as he had seen the man do with the dottle.

At first there was only the ride. It was utterly, absorbingly fascinating. There was no jar, no up-and-down movement, no swaying. The dottle cart had been bumpy; this was a flow, a dreamlike rhythm. And there was no doubt of it, he would travel all the rest of his journey this way. He would—

He was watching the galloping motion of the beast's rear legs, and the way the seemingly heavy tail seemed to float in the air behind the great animal, when his glance sheared up to take in part of the road behind him. There, a few lengths away, were the other three beasts, one with two men mounted on it.

They made an interesting, colorful picture, strung out at full racing gallop. It was absorbing to watch them so near him, drawing closer, closer. He felt no dismay, no sense of being personally involved, at least not immediately.

What finally brought a thin frown to his face was the way the mouths of the men opened and shut. The sound of their shouting penetrated to him above the pounding of the paws of his own beast, bringing consciousness that they were after him.

This that was happening was not right at all. He had not chased the man on the cart, but it was becoming clear that he had made a mistake. Not only had the cunning fellow enticed him onto the cart for the sole purpose of shoving him off, but he had sent these men out to continue the persecution.

With a gathering dislike, he watched the other beasts draw abreast of him. Whipping his own animal did no good. It was slower than the others, or else they knew some mysterious way of getting speed out of their mounts. Whatever the reason, they drew ahead, simultaneously pressing closer.

Finally, two of the monsters were squeezing with their long necks against the head of his beast, which slowed, then began to rear, then it stopped.

Ptath sat angry and nonplused. The situation was absolutely new, different, strange. He had a developing conviction that he ought to do something drastic, or else these men might actually try to force him off the back of his mount. His startled thought was interrupted by one of the men saying:

"So we've got him cornered. Now what?"

"Let me get a poke at him!" snarled a second. Ptath recognized the man, Dallird, whom he had knocked into the road. The fellow finished harshly: "I'll punch that handsome face of his to a bloody pulp."

Ptath glared at the man. It wasn't exactly clear what the words meant, but there was a suggestion of further shoving, that made his neck muscles swell in answering rage. A vague plan that had been in the back of his mind leaped to the fore. It seemed abruptly a simple and satisfactory solution:

He would knock all the men off their mounts, drive the beasts in front of him for a distance; and thus at one action prevent the men from following him, and from sending more persecutors

to come out and bother him.

The problem was how best to accomplish his purpose. He saw that one of the men was drawing a long, pointed thing from a scabbard that lay across the back of the man's own mount. The pointed thing flashed up high into the air.

"Get off!" the man cried. "Get down to the road or I'll hit you over the head with my spear."

"Why not stick it into him?" urged the man, Dallird, ferociously. "Teach these scoundrels to interfere with temple soldiers!"

Every second Ptath disliked the fellow more. His mind blazed with anger, with a sense of outrage, a very violence of determination to carry out his purpose. There was a way, he saw, that it might be worked against Dallird and the man mounted with him.

The beast they rode was just beyond easy arm's length. By hanging onto the saddle with his fingers, slipping his left leg over, and reaching swiftly—

That would leave him open to the attack of the man with the spear and the man on the third beast; but it was already clear that he would have to carry out his plan by stages.

There would be pain, of course, but—

With a sliding movement he snatched at the two men. A fist landed on his face. It stung, but it was the novelty of it, not the pain, that made him retaliate in kind.

His knuckles crashed into the face of the man beside Dallird. Bones cracked, blood spurted. The man crumpled back with a single cry and hung limply down from the saddle.

It was such an effective method that Ptath lashed at Dallird. The man was shrinking away; and so no bones broke. But he half fell, half slid to the ground. He stood there shouting shrilly:

"Stick him, Bir, stick him! He's killed San."

Ptath jerked himself back into his saddle. He expected pain in his back, but nothing happened. The man with the spear was well down the road; in a moment he disappeared over a near hill.

Ptath frowned about that, then urged his own mount forward. No one tried to stop him.

His intention was to try to catch the fellow. But as he came to the rim of the great valley, down which the road wound, he saw that the man was steadily widening the gap between them. He disappeared into a distant clump of trees.

The road kept twisting gently to the right as Ptath plunged down into the valley. It curved past men working in dark, grassless fields, past curious-looking wooden and stone mounds that usually stood well back among clumps of trees. It came finally to the clump of trees where the man, Bir, had disappeared—and divided neatly in two.

Astounded, Ptath pulled his beast to a halt. The spectacle of what he had come to accept as a perfectly normal road splitting into two roads of equal size was a major development that required long seconds to absorb.

His tenseness yielded to the drab fact. The roads just lay there. One section, he saw, continued rightward, almost due north, through the trees. The other turned westward onto a great plain, westward toward distant Ptath. He had been on the west road a long time when a sound came from the sky.

The flying beast swept low over him, its great, blue-gray wings flapping explosively, its long, triangular head poking down, peering at him from livid, fire-colored eyes. It was not until it swung back toward him that he saw that one of the two men mounted on its back was the man, Bir. Only he didn't have his spear any more.

Ptath stiffened. He had begun to wonder why the man had not sent other persecutors to bother him. Here was the answer. The man had gone to get this enormous flying thing so that he could come back himself.

Ptath shook his fist at the bird and shouted, the way the riders of long-necked beasts had done to him. This persistent pursuit was becoming unbearable. He would have to—

His black rage faded as the flying beast circled him once more, then whirled off ahead, flying like a streak. It became a spot in the sky, vanished in the blue mists to the west.

There was nothing to do but ride on, wondering. Other things puzzled, too. The sun which he had scarcely noticed when it was high above him, appeared suddenly well down toward the western horizon, directly over a gathering cloud of dust.

The dust came nearer, dissolved finally into a long line of beasts like his own, each with a rider. Above the racing animals soared a host of bluish-gray flying things.

The great concourse swept toward him; a solid wave of a score of animals engulfed him. Just what happened, Ptath was not quite sure. Something long and thin, like an elongated rein, flicked at him. Instantly, his arms were pinioned; instantly he was jerked to the ground.

He landed on his hands and knees; and for a moment the confusion was complete. Beasts milled around him. There were shouts, a bedlam that made thinking hard, impossible to concentrate.

At last, almost blankly, he scrambled to his feet. He snatched at the lasso, and with one jerk tore it, flung it aside. Free of that curious restraint, he grew suddenly grimly conscious that he was dismounted once more, and that the whole sorry business of obtaining an animal to ride must be gone through again.

His eyes narrowed; his gaze flashed from face to face of the riders surround-

ing him, searching for the man, Bir. He wasn't there; and that was good. That meant they wouldn't know about his version of the trick. He thought for a moment, considering intently the exact words he should use in view of what he had heard and seen. Then he said:

"Someone, come down and give me a hand up. It is only three kanbs to Linn, and they will feed me at the temple there and give me medical attention. I—"

He stopped at that point—stopped because his gaze fell on a—not man. The creature resembled the others, but in place of shorts she wore a long dark gown; and, instead of sitting in a saddle on the neck of her mount, she rode in a box under a canopy that was strapped to the broad back of the gigantic animal.

From the person's head hung long, dark hair that gleamed in the sun; the woman spoke in a rich contralto:

"My lord," she said, "that is the strangest speech I have ever heard. Is the man mad?"

A tall man with iron-gray hair said: "I'm afraid so. I forgot to tell you, daughter, that screer rider, knowing we were homeward bound, flew out to warn us that we would meet this fellow. It seems he has already committed murder. Captain, inform the temple princess of the situation."

Ptath listened to the explanation with an absorbing interest. There were puzzling things about it, words that conjured no pictures, but enough came clear to bring the anger thickening into his throat at the distorted account that unfolded. But it did not occur to him to correct the story, or even that anything more would grow out of the affair.

The simple fact was that, starting with the man in the dottle cart, there had been a whole series of attempts to prevent him from riding. It was all very irritating; but their numbers were now so great that, for the time being at least he had better accept the situation. He would continue afoot.

The decision made, he turned, stooped under the great green belly of a beast, and started off along the side of the road.

A soft, cool breeze was blowing. It brushed steadily against his cheeks as he walked. It brought with it a strong but not unpleasant odor of sweating animals; and a thin perfume of grass, trees and plowed fields, and grain that stood low and green; the whole combining into a rich, heady mixture that was exhilarating.

Discord came abruptly as a shout rent the air. There was a stirring of animals, and then a great milling and stamping. And then they had him surrounded again. The woman said softly:

"Even for a madman, his psychology is strange. What are you going to do with him, my lord?"

The man shrugged. "Execute him, of course. Murder is murder." He nodded to the captain: "Dismount six men. Take him into that plowed field and bury him. A three-foot grave will do."

Ptath watched curiously as the men dismounted. The words the man called "my lord" had spoken had meaning of a sort, but there was so much new in them that his mind would build no pictures. And the very quiet seriousness of the tone added dimness and abstractness to a situation that was becoming more puzzling by the second.

Reality came sharply as two men he had not noticed stepped from behind him and grabbed his elbows firmly. The action was so personal and was followed immediately by an attempt to jerk him forward that he shoved them violently away.

The men went flying into the dirt. Ptath turned irritably as a third man dived for his knees. The man's shoulder striking him staggered him; and he struck fiercely at the fellow's head. The man slumped to the ground and lay there.

Ptath stepped clear of the fallen body

and felt himself grabbed around the body and arms by two of the remaining three; the third caught his legs. The trio lifted him clear of the ground, and that was unendurable. Puzzlement transformed into a surge of fury.

With a single kick he smashed at the face of the man who held his legs. Instantly, back on his feet, Ptath snatched angrily at the two other men, caught them, held them up for a moment, one struggling, twisting body in each hand, then flung them angrily aside.

He looked up then from the man, "my lord," to the woman, then back to the man. For the first time he blamed him for this new, inexplicable assault. His eyes blazed at the fellow, and in a single glance measured the distance between himself and the other. If he could throw him off his beast this stupidity might end. To one side, he was aware of the woman saying:

"I seem to have seen him before somewhere. Stranger, what is your name?"

The question stopped him at the beginning of his run. His name? Why, Ptath, of course, Ptath of Gonwonlane, thrice-greatest Ptath.

Abruptly, he felt astounded that the question should have been asked at all. He shook his head, impatient of the shouts that made it almost impossible for his own answer to reach the woman. My lord was yelling something about arrows; and, simultaneously, there was a poignant pain in Ptath's chest.

He looked down and was amazed to see a thin piece of wood protruding from his left breast. He stared at it for a moment blankly, then pulled it out and threw it on the ground. The pain vanished.

A second arrow pinned his arm to his body. He tore it out, too; and once more he turned toward the man who was causing this trouble. He heard the woman cry out to the man:

"My lord, stop them, stop them! Didn't you hear what he said? Don't you see?"

"Eh?" The man turned toward her. Ptath, struggling in a rising fury with a third arrow, heard the puzzled note in his voice.

"Don't you see?" the woman answered faintly. *"He whose strength is unlimited, who tires not, and knows no fear—"*

The man's voice lashed: "What madness are you talking? That's a myth we keep alive for the masses. We've agreed a thousand times that the Goddess Ineznia uses that Ptath stuff as propaganda."

He broke off: "Why, it's impossible."

She screamed: "Stop them! He's come back after ages of being merged with the race. Look closely! His face! Like the statue in the temple."

"Or like Prince Ineznio, the goddess' lover," said the man. "But never mind. Let me handle this with key questions."

The hysteria faded from the woman's face; her eyes narrowed. "Not here," she said quickly. "Get him to the temple."

My lord's deep voice resonated to his men. In the silence that followed, he said quietly to Ptath:

"You will come with us to the temple at Linn. We will feed you and give you medical attention, and then we will give you a flying screer that will take you where you want to go."

As swiftly as that the incomprehensible attack ended.

II.

In the depths of the great citadel palace of the city of Ptath, the dark, glorious woman sighed drearily.

The stone floor where she lay huddled was damp and cold. In all the ages of her imprisonment she had never yet succeeded in warming the chill out of the enlacing metal chains that sagged endlessly on top of her.

From where she lay she could see the chair where the golden-haired woman sat laughing with triumph. Could hear that soft, ringing laughter, which ended

as the golden woman said in a rich, thrillingly clear voice:

"And do you doubt me now, L'onee darling? Once again it is the old story. Do you remember the time when you refused to believe that I could imprison you? Yet here you are.

"And do you remember when I first came down here to tell you that I intended to destroy mighty Ptath, how you reminded me that only the two of us could bring him back, and that I would have to use you as a pole of power, and that that would require your consent?

"Yet here he is; and you now know that I used you as a pole of power *without* your consent. Perhaps at last you are beginning to realize that while you waited with trusting simplicity for your Ptath to live his myriad human spans, I learned the potent vastness of the godpower he had given into our care."

The dark woman stirred. Her cold lips parted. She said in a weary yet steely, contemptuous voice:

"You traitor, Ineznia!"

In the half light, a smile played around the lips of the other.

"How naive we are," she said softly. "And yet how clearly your every word shows that you realize I cannot fail to win. Naive because those biting words of yours will seem very empty indeed when Ptath is dead, and you are dead, forever."

The dark woman sat up. Something of the intensity of her spirit showed in the fire that was suddenly in her voice:

"We're not dead yet, either of us. And now that you have watched him in action do you not feel a vague tendril of alarm, Ineznia? The dynamic reality of Ptath, even though you have him in Gonwonlane before his time, even though he arrived stripped of power, the sheer violence of his personality must"—a sardonic note crept into her tone—"must surely have caused you a tiny, disturbing tremor of awful doubt.

"And don't forget, darling Ineznia, don't forget the spells he set up in the long ago to protect himself from just such a danger as you now threaten. Seven spells, Ineznia, no more, no less. But the pattern is that only he can render them harmless."

She finished mockingly: "I can picture you trying to persuade the untamed ego of an elemental and immensely willful Ptath to do what you desire. A Ptath, moreover, who is moment by moment becoming more cunning, and hourly growing in mental stature. Time flies, Ineznia, precious, irreplaceable time."

For a moment, as she finished, the small stone dungeon rang with her satiric laughter. The sound died. Abruptly conscious that she was wasting her strength, L'onee sank back to her prostrate position.

And saw that she had made no impression.

There was a look of purest glee on the lovely child-face of the Goddess Ineznia, the joy of an animal that has succeeded in rousing the futile rebellion of an utterly helpless victim.

"How strange," Ineznia purred, "that you have thought of the very things for which I have all the answers.

"I would indeed be playing with fire if I permitted Ptath to develop and learn in a normal fashion—*as Ptath*. Perhaps you have forgotten that he has had many human personalities. The last of these I shall bring to the fore; to dominate, to confuse and be confused.

"As for those lovely little spells, how easily they will be destroyed! The main one, as you know, is the shining godchair in the palace of the Nushir of Nushirvan. To reach it, Ptath will have to conquer Nushirvan. I shall leave that to the ingenuity of his human personality, and to the great armies I shall furnish him. Actually, I have several alternative plans.

"So long as that chair exists, I can never command all the power of Gon-

woniane. It is the potent symbol of his supremacy.

"I must persuade him, or force him, to cross the river of boiling mud, which has all these ages prevented me from reaching the chair. I need hardly say that I will require only a few hours to destroy the chair, once I get to it.

"The other spells I shall weave into the pattern of the greater one. He must make love to me, as a recognition of my godhood.

"He must experience the power flow of a prayer stick, sign your death warrant, come with me in a journey of minds, go consciously through the realm of darkness, and, as I have said, cross the river of boiling mud.

"But now, L'onee, darling, I must leave you. The procession escorting Ptath is approaching the temple of Linn; and I must take possession of the mind of the temple princess, and be *there*, on the scene, controlling, shaping events—"

As the dark woman watched, Ineznia sank deeper into her chair and closed her eyes. The pressure of her strong presence faded: slowly, the dungeon grew dim.

The two bodies, the silent, enchained form of L'onee, the deathly still, seated shape of Ineznia, seemed shadows projected from some greater darkness.

The days passed.

III.

The temple was a region of dark, lowering skies and inclosing horizons. Uneasily conscious of those near walls and the ceiling pressing down at him, Ptath stared at the food on the table.

Mists rose from it, and an exudation of heat and, above all, a tantalizing odor that pleasantly tickled his nostrils. From the narrow end of the table, my lord's voice suggested that he sit down. Puzzled, Ptath did so.

He had missed nothing during the ride here to the temple at Linn. His senses, whetted by hard experience, quickened by new thoughts, had registered everything: The circular town, the temple itself that rose white and tall from the small forest of trees, around which the other buildings clustered. That temple which had so curiously lost its whiteness as he entered.

He saw that the others were sitting. There was my lord and the temple princess, dark and intense, her hair lustrous in the gloom, her eyes shining like the water that had given him pain. The difference was that he had no sense of unpleasantness.

The several men in dark robes he scarcely noticed. They were nameless creatures who had slipped almost noiselessly into the room. They sat with expressionless faces watching him from eyes that were uniformly black.

"All is well"—it was the woman; a hissing sound her voice made on the stillness—"he has never seen food before."

Ptath looked at her quickly. There was something about the way she said it that he didn't like. She smiled a swift little smile, and that made her look so dazzling he forgot his irritation.

My lord said: "Careful! Let us eat, and see if he follows suit."

"I am sure," said the woman after a little, "that it is quite unnecessary to guard our tongues. He has come back mindless. He knows nothing. *Look* at him."

It was the first taste that did it. Ptath gulped on without thought, or further attention to the others. The things were warm and good. Each bite thrilled his tongue. He did not even notice the instruments beside the plate.

Oddly, the bites grew progressively distasteful. He pushed the plate away finally, scowling at it.

"Where is the screer?" he said matter-of-factly. "I will now fly to Ptath."

It was the woman who stood up, smiling. "This way," she said.

My lord half rose as she passed his chair, put a restraining hand on her arm. "Are you sure—" he began anxiously.

"We can only lose our lives," the woman answered. "If we win, our reward may be a temple kingdom, a city empire. Father, I assure you I know what I am doing."

My lord stepped back, but his face was dark. The princess smiled at the frowning Ptath, who had followed the conversation with a dim comprehension.

"This way!" she said; and her voice was so strong and confident that once more his vague doubts faded. "The screer is waiting down these steps."

Her smile drew him. He liked her for a reason that wasn't clear. He followed her. He could almost feel himself flying through the air, the way the man, Bir, had flown above him, and the other screers on the journey back to Linn. The mental picture was exhilarating.

The steps led farther down than he remembered coming up. But finally the downward part of the descent ended. There was a level of hard floor. Glowing sticks stood at intervals along the broad corridor, and there were many closed doors. The woman paused at last before a door that stood open.

"Through there," she smiled. She motioned with her arm and touched his hand with a curious gliding movement of her palm. Her flesh felt warm; it made his whole being tingle with liking for her.

Ptath stepped across the threshold, and found himself in a tiny room with a very low sky. A single light stick hung from the low ceiling of the otherwise bare room.

Thud! The sound came from behind him. Ptath turned and saw that the door had closed. He stood there blankly as a small stone slot clinked open. The woman's face appeared in it.

"Do not be alarmed, Ptath," she said. "We have changed our minds about giving you a screer. We are sending instead to Ptath for your wife, the glorious Ineznia. She will come and take you back to the great city. This is your room until she arrives."

"By Accadistran!" My lord's voice hissed in the corridor behind her. "You don't really expect him to remain so quiet—"

The slot snapped shut. The voice cut off as if it had been broken. Abruptly, the light blinked out.

There was silence. And darkness.

Ptath stood uncertain in the blackness. He kept expecting the door to open with the announcement that glorious Ineznia—that was the name the temple princess had used; he remembered every syllable of its pronunciation—had arrived to take him to Ptath.

Time passed. Impatience grew in him, the conviction that he could have reached Ptath by now even if he had had to walk. Thought of walking brought the comparison idea of sitting. The floor was cold and hard, but he sat there and waited.

And waited and waited. And waited and waited and waited.

Miasms drifted like so much smoke through his mind. Thought forms came that had no meaning, strange half thoughts, and one an idea of incredible lucidity: This was mad, it said. Something was wrong. He must do something.

It took a long, long time to decide what. But finally he climbed to his feet, a titanic rage flaring in his mind. He tried the door, lunging at it with all his terrible strength.

But it held. It did not even shudder from the plunging weight of his body.

Curiously, then, he was sitting again on the floor—curiously, because he had no conscious memory of having seated himself. He sat there.

Time passed. The darkness and the silence became separate, palpable forces that distorted the even flow of life currents in his body, unsteadied the positive continuity of his will, and brought changes—incredible thoughts.

"Keep the tank going. Nurse that engine. We're almost over . . . over—Watch out . . . out— There's a dive

bomber. He's got us—"

Blackout.

For uncounted ages, Holroyd's body strained against darkness. In that blackness was no past, no present, no future, simply a cold hardness of damp stone that braised his bones and pressed with blind, deadly force against his flesh. Slowly but surely that unrelenting coldness was drawing the warm life out of him.

Holroyd came to consciousness with a start. He had the impression of emerging from a restless, nightmarish sleep, but no sleep had ever had such an awakening. His fingers fumbled over a chill stone floor he couldn't see because the blackness in that room was opaque.

He tried to sit up; and, because it did not occur to him that he couldn't, because his mind did not even remotely accept this blackness as real, this damp stone as his bed—he reached a sitting posture before the first sick urge of dizziness stabbed at his reason.

He sat there blank-brained, his body racked by the frightful nausea. The enveloping night whirled insensately, and the cold of the floor was like a wind that sucked at his bones. And then—

From somewhere inside him rage came, a blazing fury of mortal rage, somehow *directed*, somehow based on understanding of why he was here.

"Damn her!" he railed. "Oh, damn the temple princess!"

An unnatural quality in the meaning of that booming blast of echoing sound startled him. Anger drained from his body; and after a long, ponderous moment a childlike wonder struck into his consciousness.

"Temple princess!" he repeated aloud, and cocked his head, straining to penetrate the alien core of that phrase. But for a long, dead-blank time his painful concentration yielded nothing. Slowly, his brain grasped again at its dim train of idea.

"Temple princess!" he said once more. But this time there was no voice in him; and the words were little more than a hoarse ripple in the black stillness around him. It was sheer amazement that brought a flow of strength. He exclaimed aloud:

"Why, there's nothing like that in America, or in the part of Germany where we're fighting. Maybe North Africa— No!"

There was madness here, a fantastic madness that pounded at his temples as he half lowered himself, half fell back, dazed from the terrible effort of his brief thoughts and briefer movements.

For a time he simply sprawled there. His mind quivered at the very verge of an abyss of night. Vague, measured thought forms floated sluggishly into it, a gentle stirring of a vast, devastating complexity of memory that included the equally slow, equally tremendous realization that his words, except for the place names, had been spoken in a language at once foreign and familiar, a language so sweet in the soft harmony of its speech that the very words—America, Germany, North Africa—had been like discordant hammer blows interrupting a concert, harsh, cacophonous and barbarous.

"Say, you, who call yourself Ptath!"

It was a man's voice, deep and melodious, out of the near darkness.

That was for him. Holroyd struggled to turn over. But the cold had him now, as if it was ice that incased him. He gave up and lay still, but his mind fastened, leechlike, on the name word. His lips moved, his voice muttered:

"Holroyd Ptath! No, that's not right. Must be Ptath Holroyd! No Holroyd is an American. Peter Holroyd, captain, 290th tank brigade, and— But who is Ptath?"

The question was like a key to a lightly locked door. Memory—came.

Memory came.

After a moment he said aloud, in explosive amazement: "I'm—mad!"

Ptath, the god of Gonwoulane, whose

last human personality, that of Peter Holroyd, tank-corps captain, had emerged from the hidden deeps of his brain under mind-destroying stress, sat up.

"Damn it!" he said. "I'm Holroyd. That other stuff is—"

Holroyd stopped, shuddering with a dim horror; he felt a brief cold terror, a quaver of fear, a sharp consciousness of the intensity of that other almost mindless self.

"This is crazy!" he thought wildly. "Crazy!"

But after a minute it was all still there: the dark room, the other mind, the knowledge that he was alive, who had been in a tank squarely hit by a German bomb.

And there was abrupt awareness of something else, remembrance of the voice that had spoken to him, the voice that had called him—Ptath.

No, that was wrong. The voice hadn't called him Ptath. The voice had said:

"You who *call* yourself Ptath!"

There was a subtle difference in the meaning that made Holroyd frown with thought. He lay very still, thinking of the things that Ptath had seen on the road and in the temple.

His mind began to shake on its foundations, his whole being to tremble with a nameless wonder. The dread, the horror pulsed against his mind like the discordant clashing of cymbals.

But the passing of the

seconds brought surcease, awareness of the double identity that was inside him.

Whatever it was couldn't hurt him physically.

It was a part of him. Or, rather—he was a part of it, but for some reason he dominated, his thought, his personality, his—self.

He began to feel better. The awful tenseness went out of his muscles. His whole being relaxed.

The rasp of heavy breathing broke the silence of the darkness that engulfed him; then came an undertone of cursing:

"Where in Nushirvan is that light. It should be in this corner— Ah!"

A pale white light flickered on, revealing what Holroyd had already recollected: a small, bare concrete room with a solid stone floor.

Not exactly solid. A slab of stone in the corner beside the door had been neatly pushed up and laid aside. Where it had been, barely visible from Holroyd's prostrate position, was the entrance to a tunnel.

Slowly, painfully, Holroyd twisted his head toward the source of the light. A small man was standing directly under the glowing stick, staring at him. The fellow was neatly dressed in shorts and a tucked-in shirt. He had shining eyes in a round, cheerful face that creased slowly into a frown as he stared at Holroyd.

"Say," he said, "you look in a bad way. I should have come before, I guess, but I didn't know which cell they'd put you in, and, besides, I've been waiting for them to come to feed you."

He screwed up his lips thoughtfully. "Funny, they haven't done that.

"But never mind," he plunged on. "I've got some soup down in the tunnel that ought to go pretty good."

He bounded across to the hole. "I'll have it up for you in a spasm."

The soup was warm and life-giving. It tingled deliciously in his mouth and trickled like dull fire down into his body. It soothed; it eased the dreadful chill of his flesh, and brought a glorious sense of approaching well-being. As he sipped, Holroyd listened to the babble of words the little man poured at him.

"Name's Tar, representing all the prisoners in the Linn temple, and welcoming you to our ranks. Naturally, our organization here is associated with the rebels, and betrayal of us means death. That's all you need to know.

"Know all that's known about *you*, of course," the man chattered on. "You claim to be Ptath. That's a good line. That's new. Nobody ever thought of it before. Maybe the rebels can use you if you're prepared to carry that pretense on. But more than that, the farmer who picked you up on the road says you've got amnesia."

The hideous effort necessary to keep himself from swallowing the soup at one gulp made it hard to concentrate. For long his mind seemed incapable of anything but listening.

But abruptly Holroyd grew aware of a strange and terrible thing. Something inside him—something—was listening with his mind to every word that Tar was uttering. Listening intently, with a steely ferocious consciousness of the meaning of what was being said.

It was a long, blank moment before he realized that the something was—himself.

Holroyd sat very still. He could feel the chill of the concrete against which he leaned. Warming his fingers was the long, narrow tumbler of clear soup. And all around, so closely around, was the damp and formidable dungeon cell.

The awareness of his environment was more acute than at any time since his first consciousness of it; and yet it was overshadowed by the grim fact of that other, greater being who in some curious and unpleasant way had become intimately integrated with his own personality.

The two were one, yet there were

two. Holroyd groaned inwardly: So that was what amnesia was like—when you remembered the other self.

He sat intent on the problem involved, shaken by the identity that other self had claimed, and by his memory of the things that it had done, and by—

The temple princess had said she was sending for someone called the Goddess Ineznia. Until this instant the name had been in the background of his mind—a normal memory.

But now his brain paused. Sending for *whom?*

The soup was all gone now. He clung to the tumbler because of its warmth. It was the only warmth there was. His brain was a frozen thing inside his head.

The Goddess Ineznia!

The title roared in his mind. He swayed, and curious little darknesses slithered through his mind. A thought shaped finally, a thought so sharp that it seemed to pierce his being like a hard-driven knife, the thought that—

He had to get out of here. No matter who Ptath was, Peter Holroyd couldn't handle a situation like this.

He had to get out—unless it was already too late.

His eyes widened with the possibility. He felt a feverish fear. Every muscle tensed, he glared at the little man.

"How long"—his voice was a croaking sound in his own ears—"have I been here?"

The moment he had spoken he realized that he had interrupted the other, and that Tar had been chattering steadily from the first moment. The man broke off, frowning:

"That's what I've been telling you. The stories about you say that you were as strong as a grimb; and yet, seven days without food and water, I find you like this, practically dead—"

The man said more, but Holroyd didn't hear. Seven days, he mused. For seven days the god Ptath had lain here slowly going mad, and finally the stress had become so great that he had lapsed to his last reincarnation.

The thought jangled because—so much deterioration in seven days? Impossible.

The time involved was more like seven years or even seven hundred years. Ptath, who had no conception of time lying in a timeless darkness may have experienced time *faster than his surroundings.* That was the only possible explanation of such a tremendous final result.

Once again Holroyd's thought ended with violence. He sat blankly amazed at himself, at the very idea that he could—even have such a conception. What kind of madness was this that afflicted him?

Seven hundred years in seven days!

He licked dry lips, clenched his mind and concentrated on—seven days.

"How long," he said aloud, "would it take a"—his twentieth-century brain paused before the word, then with an effort he spoke it—"a flying screer to fly from here to Ptath and back?"

The bright eyes of Tar were regarding him oddly. "You're a funny fellow," the man said finally. "There was some story about you being on your way to Ptath. But that only proves you must have been in a bad way before they put you in here."

He shook his head, and Holroyd had the sudden feeling that he was being deliberately frustrated. His impulse was to snatch at the man and tear the answer out of him. His mind rocked with a savage anger.

At the last instant he recognized the unnatural fury as not of Holroyd. He caught himself and said shakily:

"But how long . . . how long would it take?"

"You don't understand," the man replied. "Your question is silly. No screer has ever been flown from Linn direct to Ptath. It's too far. The time the temple princess made the trip, she flew north to the sea city of Tamardee, then on to Lapisar and gorgeous Ghay, and so on along the coast. Altogether

the trip took two months.

"Mind you," Tar went on, "there are supposed to be really fast breeds of birds. They say that some of the goddess' messengers riding especially trained thoroughbreds can fly from one end of Gonwonlane to the other in a little over eight days without stopovers. That would be six days from here to Ptath. But now, listen—"

Holroyd sighed. Six days there and six days back. The goddess knew, had known for a full day now. Five more days and she would be here.

He had just five days to escape from a temple dungeon.

IV.

The shortness of the time involved was not really depressing at first. He felt no urge to get up, or even to think while he waited for Tar to bring more soup.

There was a vague wonder about the source of the soup, and of the other foods that Tar, before he scuttled back into his hole, had promised for later meals.

The awareness that came finally, however, was startling:

A part of him did not worry. It *waited* for the arrival of the goddess. Cold and intent it waited, an untamed force unconscious of limitations, accepting the knowledge of Holroyd's brain in the same fashion it had earlier accepted its own identity, its own purpose.

The feeling was strong and utterly unmistakable. Sitting there, Holroyd had no doubt at all. Ptath, the childlike god of Gonwonlane and Peter Holroyd were inhabiting the same body, and the god considered Holroyd as one segment of his being.

Which he was.

Holroyd shuddered, and then experienced a wild, personal rage:

"You idiot!" he shouted. "Don't you realize what a mess you've got us into, letting a pretty, smiling face lure you into this dungeon? The veriest sap would need to take only one look at the tyranny set-up of temple prince, temple king, temple emperor with the goddess somewhere at the top of that heirarchy to know that your arrival constituted the purest dynamite. You can't—"

He stopped. His voice reverberated briefly in the narrow confines of the cell. In the silence that followed, Holroyd thought with a wry weariness:

What a hopeless outburst, a madman shouting advice to himself.

But he felt better for it, more conscious suddenly that he was in charge of the body, his mind doing the thinking, controlling the vocal cords.

As for that basic, god-confidence of Ptath, it wouldn't hurt to have it there, wouldn't hurt during crises to know that there was a part of him that had no fear, no doubt of its own capabilities, but lived on with a savage certainty of its right to everything.

It wouldn't hurt to *feel* unkillable.

The second time Tar came he brought more soup, and a big, green citrus fruit. It was amazingly juicy and sweet, the flavor delicious and unlike anything Holroyd had ever tasted.

The taste of it, the concrete reality of its strangeness brought a question that had not come even in embryo from the earlier abstract thought and memory that had racked him:

Where was Gonwonlane?

Where was a land with cities called Ptath and Tamardee and Lapisar and Ghay?

Gorgeous Ghay, Tar had said. Holroyd tried to picture that. And couldn't. It had no meaning; the picture of splendor evoked was only a misty version of some of the cities he had seen on 1944 Earth, alive with their slums, their bleak streets, their depressing commercial life.

He intoned the names aloud: Gonwonlane, Ptath— There was a rhythm in them, a strange sweetness of sound that was like music.

The need to know grew stronger. Where was Gonwonlane? In a tingling excitement he turned to ask Tar and saw that he was alone. The stone was in place.

Curious little man coming out of a subterranean world like some elfin creature of myths. Holroyd was still lying there a timeless period later when the stone moved; and Tar came up. He had more fruit and some bread, pure white bread, soft, newly baked.

Holroyd seized the precious, familiar food and the tears blurred his vision. He felt amazement at the depth of the reaction, a brief shame—but the shame faded.

It was good to know that wherever Gonwonlane might be, it was joined to the twentieth century by endless streams of bread. He had a sudden picture of thousands of miles and years of bread stretching into the past and into the future, the staple diet of a vast portion of the people of Earth forever. He parted his lips but it was Tar who spoke:

"I've been wondering," the little man said matter-of-factly, "about that amnesia business. You're getting along like chain lightning physically, but what about your mind? If you could read that would be the quickest method of solving the problem."

"Read?" echoed Holroyd. And felt an immense astonishment. He had not once thought of books in Gonwonlane.

"Sure—look!" Tar jerked a folder from a pocket inside his shirt and held it out. Holroyd took the silky-smooth yet stiff paper and stared at words that could have blared straight out of a communist manifesto:

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ATTACK ON ACCADISTRAN

The foul action of the lord of Accadistran in using the outlaws of Nushirvan to kidnap Gonwonlanian citizens demands retributive war on the largest scale. The government of the goddess Inernia must be forced to launch an attack on this scoundrel.

Efforts must be concentrated on persuading more and more people to change their prayers, those prayers which, in their totality, create the godpower of the goddess. The people must—

"All right, you can read." The little man snatched the folder from Holroyd's fingers. "I can see by the way you move your lips. I'll have some books up here in a spasm."

He lowered himself into the hole, became a head and shoulders that ducked into the nether depth.

The hole quietened. Tar returned with almost no preliminary sound. He had two quite normal-looking books with him.

"I'll be up before breakfast to collect those, so read as much of them as you can before you go to sleep. It's true they haven't fed you so far, but we can't take any chances. Give me those fruit rinds."

A minute later Holroyd was examining with trembling fingers the first of the two volumes.

For a minute he merely thumbed hastily. He felt such a blazing eagerness to see everything that he caught only tantalizing glimpses of pictures and of page after page of print.

It *was* print, clear black ink impressed onto a white background. The paper was of a stiff but not too glossy material, and the pages were bound with something that could have been glue.

The pictures were all colored photographs, or else drawing done with such minute attention to detail that the illusion of photograph was instantaneous. And the illusion remained as he rippled the treasure pages with only an occasional excited pause for a more careful examination.

The book was titled "History of Gonwonlane from the Earliest Times." With deliberate will, Holroyd turned finally to page one of the text and read:

In the beginning was the Shining One, Ptath, god of land, sea and space, on whom be all praise heaped, and countless prayers

offered that he may return to his chosen from his millions of years of merging with the race, which noble sacrifice he made for the glory of his people and for the development of his spirit, O Diyan, O Kolla and divine Rad.

Holroyd blinked at the words, then reread them frowningly, noting the reference to millions of years. A slow smile came finally. The author was being just a little too soulful, the cynical twist in the "lip" service too apparent. The second paragraph confirmed the impression, for it began without further preamble:

Earth is a very old planet, long inhabited by human beings. The continents and seas have suffered many cataclysmic changes, not the least of these being the gradual dissolution of ancient Gondwanaland and the equally gradual re-solution of this mightiest of all land masses—

Holroyd read the volume from beginning to end without a pause, then picked up the second book with an automatic and stupendous interest.

The title said: "History of the World in Maps With Explanatory Text." The cartographs showed Earth from the remotest times, but the skillful, detailed drawings of the continents of long ago had an unreal quality that he couldn't seem to concentrate on.

In the end only modern Gonwonlane mattered. It was an appallingly long and wide stretch of land that ran more than halfway around the southern hemisphere, bulged tremendously toward the north, and terminated at a point well east of what more than a hundred million years before had been, according to the text, "ancient Asdralia."

Gonwonlane was eleven thousand kanbs long, five thousand kanbs at its widest, and it was bounded in the northwest by the mountainous thousand-kanb-wide isthmus of Nushirvan.

In an almost blank mental operation, Holroyd estimated that a kanb was one and a quarter miles. Then, he returned to his studying with a gaze that, figuratively, glued to the page.

The land to the north of the Nushirvan isthmus, where ancient greater Ameriga and the continent of ancient Breton had once been, was labeled Accadistran. Only a series of large lakes marked where once had been the Atlantic Ocean.

The body of water between Accadistran and Gonwonlane was called the Sea of Teths. The population of Gonwonlane was fifty-four billion, of Accadistran nineteen billion, and of the outlaw State of Nushirvan five billion.

Geologically, Nushirvan was the most recent land body on the planet, having rocketed out of the sea only thirty million years before.

The temple town of Linn Holroyd located at the extreme east of the great southern land mass. The city of Ptath was eighty-three hundred kanbs from Linn to the northwest as a screer flies. Mighty Ptath itself was situated on the bay of the Great Cliff on the Teths Sea about twelve hundred kanbs from the nearest outjut of Nushirvan.

The wonder of it grew and grew and grew. Holroyd kept climbing to his feet, pacing the floor, book in hand, in a thrall of fascination. He reread whole sections of the history with its account of a goddess-ruled empire so vast that his mind alternately quailed and soared from the picturing of it.

But slowly a conviction formed, a steeling of his mind, a heady certainty that there wasn't a soldier from the 1944 blitz of Germany who would really be fazed by such a situation as this. And besides—

He was dead. Except for this resurrection in the body of a god, he would be lying in a moldering tank on a battlefield so long forgotten that the soil, the memory, the very idea of it seemed already a curious, impossible tale told by a madman at a midnight fire.

A sound disturbed the hard brightness of his thought: The stone was moving.

With a swift, twisting movement, Holroyd strode over, bent, pulled the

slab up with an effortless strength. His mind was cool and steady. He had a plan as simple as it was direct.

It was time to get out of this hole.

The shadow in the hole moved. It was a shape lifting toward the light. It became a human head with eyes that peered at Holroyd brightly. Tar popped up through the square hole.

"Thanks," he puffed. "This moving of stones is wearing me down. I've got your breakfast down there, and—"

"You've got my what?" said Holroyd.

His singleness of purpose, his will to concentrate only on his plan suffered an eclipse. Breakfast? Why, he hadn't slept. He'd read all night without a thought of sleep.

Holroyd sighed deeply. The answer was obvious, of course. Gods didn't sleep. Or at least they didn't have to. Perhaps he could if he tried. He saw that Tar was looking at him wth surprised eyes.

"What's the matter?" Tar said.

Holroyd shook his head. "Nothing. I didn't realize I'd slept so long."

The little man grinned. "That is a good sign. You're looking a lot better. I'll have your breakfast up right away. Then I want to talk to you."

"And I to you," said Holroyd.

Tar had been withdrawing into the tunnel. He straightened. He eyed Holroyd narrowly.

"Eh?" he said. "For a man who was nearly dead yesterday, you're taking a quick interest in life. What's on your mind?"

"I'll tell you after I've eaten," Holroyd replied cautiously. "It's in connection with something you mentioned."

"There's only one thing I've mentioned," said Tar with a surprising coldness, "that you in your position would be interested in: I told you that the rebels might be interested in you because you'd claimed to be Ptath. That's it, isn't it?"

Holroyd was silent, startled. He hadn't thought of this roly poly, bouncing little man as having such a quick understanding, but it was the fellow's toughness that really shocked him. For the first time he wondered what Tar was in jail for. It struck him finally that he had better go slow. Tar was his contact with the outside world.

"What about it?" Holroyd said.

Tar shrugged. "I'm sorry I mentioned it in the first place. Because it's off. They're not interested. They don't see how it could be worked in any practical fashion, and besides it would be too easy for you to vanish into distance. I'm being quite frank."

"But they *could* free me?"

The little man stiffened, as if he recognized the depth of will that was behind the quietly spoken words. His eyes studied Holroyd warily. He nodded finally, grudgingly.

"Good," said Holroyd. "Tell them to come and get me tonight."

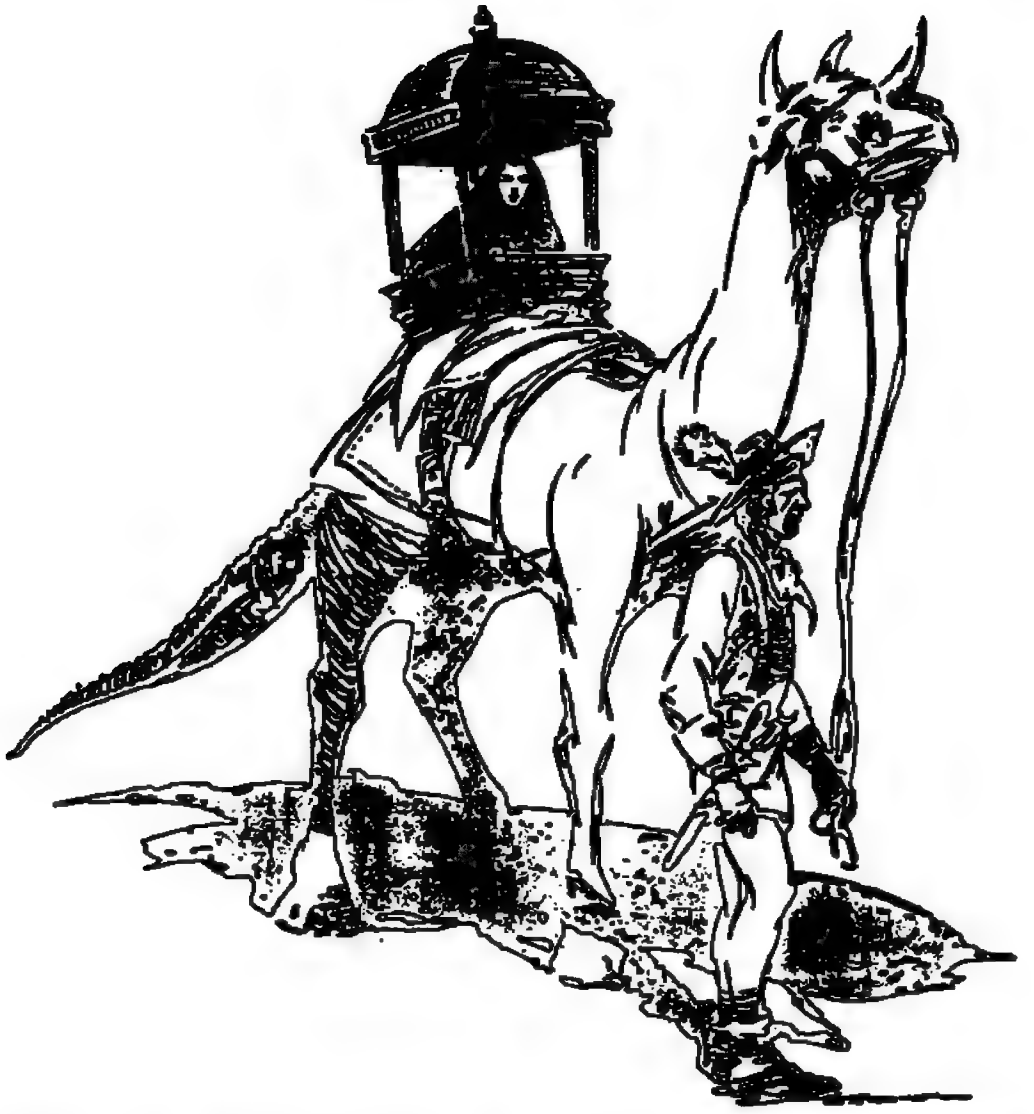
Tar started to laugh uproariously. The laugh broke in the middle, instantly bridging the gap from sound into silence. He climbed out of the hole and scowled at Holroyd. His eyes were slitted, his lips a knife-thin line. Standing there, he seemed a small animal of a man tensing for action. He said in an ugly tone:

"That's a fine way for a fellow to talk after our organization has just saved his life."

The justice of the words stung. But Holroyd knew with an utter conviction that the morality behind them didn't apply here. This was different. Ptath, the thrice greatest, transcended any such confining ethics.

"Listen," he said earnestly, "the rebel leaders made their rejection blindly, without regard to my character or my personality, which renders their decision ill considered and lacking in imagination and, therefore, worthless."

He drew a deep breath and raced on: "Tell them I am prepared to play the role of Ptath on the largest scale, that if they are strong enough to seize this



temple I am prepared to make it my headquarters. Tell them no army will ever gather recruits faster than the one that will swarm around me. Soldiers coming to attack will remain as my followers. I know enough to fool everybody including—" He stopped. He had been intending to say including the goddess. But such an extreme claim would not carry weight. He finished: "—including people of the highest intelligence."

"That's a lot of talk," said Tar coolly, "from a man who's in a dungeon."

"I was sick," said Holroyd earnestly. "Very sick."

Tar frowned, said: "I'll get in touch with them. It may take a week, though."

Holroyd shook his head. The prospect of a direct hostility between himself and Tar was not one that he relished. But there could be no evading the absolute primes of his situation. While he still had several days' leeway, it would be madness to cut the time between his escape and the goddess' arrival too close.

She would come. He was utterly

certain of that. She would come by the fastest transportation available.

"Tonight," he said flatly. "It's got to be tonight."

His gaze fastened on the tunnel; he broke off: "What about my escaping through there?"

There was no answer. Tar was lowering himself into the hole. As he ducked out of sight in the nether darkness, a thought struck Holroyd. He bent down, examined the bottom of the stone, then straightened, smiling grimly.

A moment later Tar handed up some fruit, a glass of liquid and some bread.

"Help me lower the stone," he said quietly. "I'll see what I can do for you."

It was too easy, too transparent. Holroyd suppressed a satiric smile. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but I've just noticed that there are notches in the stone for fastening it from below. I'll feel safer if the stone isn't replaced."

There was no answer to that either. One long, malignant glare Tar gave him and then he was gone.

He came back; surprisingly he came back—with lunch, with supper. But he ignored Holroyd's advances with a studied silence that left no recourse finally but action.

V.

The tunnel was a narrow shape of dark and light. Tiny light sticks protruded from the ceiling, which was so low that Holroyd had to bend almost double as he walked along.

There were side passages, dark holes scarcely big enough for a man's body. But Holroyd shook his head. It wouldn't do to lose his way in a labyrinth of byways. His only course must be to keep an unmistakable contact with this main corridor on which his own cell was located.

In abrupt curiosity, Holroyd examined the first light. Like the others it was made of wood. It felt cold to his touch; and when he pulled at it, it blinked out, as if he had pulled the switch.

It was attached to the ceiling by a wooden hinge, but the light didn't go on again till he shoved the stick itself into contact with the concrete.

The power must come out of the ground.

Holroyd was about to pass on when he noticed the tag hanging from the hinge. On it was written:

Cell 17
Occupant: Amnesia case.
Remarks: None.

The tag on the second light said: "Cell 16, Name . . . Nrad. . . . Made the mistake of hitting back at a temple soldier."

Holroyd studied the laconic inscription with grim eyes. Nrad's mistake was one that he could appreciate.

At the end of the line of lights, in the darkness beyond cell No. 1, was a steep, narrow stairway. Holroyd climbed up it past dully lighted corridors, but it was the mental image that came that disturbed him, the picture of himself in this subterranean world of a temple that towered into the blue dark sky of an earth that had aged two hundred million years since his own birth.

The time involved was meaningless, more alien than death. Funny how *parts* meant nothing. There was only this climbing up a secret stairway in a half light, climbing—ten, eleven, twelve levels.

He reached the twelfth and last, searched with a brief intentness for an outlet that might take him to the roof, and, finding none, stepped gingerly into the passageway and walked along it.

The ceiling here was high enough for him to walk erect. But here as on the dungeon level were branching tunnels that he ignored on the same simple theory that, by moving in straight lines, he wouldn't get lost.

Here, too, were tags on every light. The first one read:

"Sadra, kitchen maid, pro-rebel, one of her lovers talkative Keep Sergeant Gan. Peephole but no entrance."

It proved a typical tag. Every room was occupied by a woman servant of some kind; most of them had lovers, most were rebel supporters—and every one that Holroyd peered in at was sound asleep.

The eleventh floor was occupied entirely by men servants, all sound asleep. Soundlessly, swiftly, Holroyd worked his way down the narrow stairway; and all around him the temple slept.

Common zos occupied the eighth level, common fezos the seventh. The dark robes that hung over chairs and over the ends of beds identified them for what they were: priests! priestesses!

The fourth level was the apartment of the temple prince, and, the general direction tag went on: "his daughter, Giya, the temple princess."

Ambitious Giya, Holroyd thought savagely, cunning, treacherous, quick-thinking, power-covetous Giya. With clenched teeth, he peered through the peephole that was located at this end of her apartment. It took a moment to grasp the whole picture.

In the immediate foreground of his narrow line of vision was a large, heavily carpeted room. There were settees, chairs, tables. At the far side was the open door of a bedroom; and it was there that real interest began.

The edge of the bed and a long, narrow, shining table, with a mirror mounted on it, showed through the door. On a chair beside the table, at right angles to the door, sat the temple princess.

Her lips were moving. Holroyd pressed his ear against the peephole. Formless words drifted to him, an unintelligible yet melodious monotony of sound.

After minutes of watching, listening to that flow of sound, Holroyd left the peephole. Whoever she was talking to couldn't possibly matter as much as his search for a passageway to the career pens, his need to fly off into the still dark universe of eastern Gonwonlane.

For a timeless period he prowled along side passageways, taking great care not to venture too far afield. It must have been two hours later when he found himself again on the fourth level—and she was still talking.

Frankly curious, Holroyd fumbled his way along the branch corridor that led in the direction of her bedroom. As he stared in at her, he felt a wave of amazement.

She was alone. Her lips were moving, articulating; and her voice, as he put his ear against the tiny aperture through which he had peered, came strong and clear:

"—Let his minutes be days, his hours be years, his days be centuries. Let him know endless time as he lies in the dark. His minutes be days, his hours . . . years—"

Over and over the words were intoned; and at first Holroyd tried to think of them as a prayer, one of those endlessly repeated, senseless things designed to beat the mind into a pattern. Abruptly, that first impression collapsed like a fire denied oxygen.

The amoral, irreligious temple princess praying. And in private. Like hell she was. She—

The thought stopped. Holroyd felt a mental faintness, a daze of horror, an understanding at once comprehensive and as deadly as fleshed steel.

What was she saying? *What was she saying?* "Let his days be centuries." Why, that's what they had been—for Ptath. This was—

Too late Holroyd realized that his personal mind paralysis had briefly lost him control of his body to a mind that had no fears, nor doubts. Even as he grew aware that his hands were manipulating the secret entrance to the room, the action was done, over with; he was committed.

He stepped through the opening; and he must have made some sound because

the woman came to her feet and turned with a tigerishly swift and inhumanly violent movement.

Funny—her appearance, Holroyd thought. He hadn't really looked at her body through the peephole. But, then, he hadn't suspected.

Hard to imagine just when the transformation had taken place. It must have been on the road, an attunement derived from the thought, the recognition of the god Ptath by the temple princess.

The flash of recognition must have leaped across eight thousand three hundred kanbs to the distant city of Ptath and instantaneously brought the goddess to possess the princess' body. How it had been done was another thing entirely, impossible to explore now.

It didn't matter. He had betrayed Tar and the secret of the hidden passageways. He wouldn't have done it of his own free will, of course, but—

Holroyd felt a blind fury against the savage force inside him that was using his understanding and knowledge with such an utter disregard for danger and consequences.

The fury ran its brief, futile course.

There was only the Goddess Ineznia.

She stood there, and she was different than Ptath's memory had pictured. From the memory, Holroyd had thought of a simple god succumbing to the deliberately displayed charms of the first woman who smiled at him.

He should have known that Ptath would not be easily impressed by any human being, and at the same time would not be consciously aware of special qualities in those who did impress his untamed mind.

The woman blazed with life. No wonder the temple prince had frowned in amazement at his transformed daughter. Her eyes were pools of flamelike intensity; her body shed an aura as strong as a blazing fire. Only her voice, when it came, was soft, though there was an eagerness in it, a strange passion and pride that, for an instant, had no relation to any reality:

"Peter Holroyd," she glowed. "Oh, Ptath, this is a great moment in our lives. Do not be alarmed by my recognition of your identity. Know only this, that we have tasted victory. We have won the first, though not the most dangerous, round in the Goddess Ineznia's determined war to destroy you.

"She it was who drew you to Gonwonlane from the parallel time *before* you were due to come normally. Without knowledge, stripped of power, you were to be materialized in the citadel palace—and destroyed.

"Wait! Do not speak!" Her voice was suddenly as strong as a vibrating steel bar. Holroyd, who had parted his lips to express his bewilderment, closed them again.

Not the goddess, he thought in a daze; this was *not* the goddess. But then who—

The woman was pressing on, her voice stronger, more urgent:

"All those initial plans of hers I have frustrated. Using my carefully hoarded remnant of god power, of which she knew nothing, I placed you at this remote point of Gonwonlane, usurped the body of the temple princess, and placed your elemental mind under a constant strain of pressure, designed to draw from its depth the whole personality of its last reincarnation.

"With success has this been done. And so, Peter Holroyd"—her tone was bell-like—"your fight for life begins. Act much as you would if you were in enemy territory. Be abnormally suspicious, but bold beyond all your previous conceptions, on anything you decide to do. In crises trust your immortal body.

"Here is what you *must* do: You must conquer Nushirvan by any means that may occur to you. Think about that as you fly toward Ptath this night. It will take a little time for your mind

to grasp the utter importance of this attack.

"And now"—she gave him a strangely sad smile—"that is all that I can tell you. Except for that, my lips are sealed by the same spell that has held my body in a dungeon of the citadel palace for more ages than I have been able to count.

"Ptath—Peter Holroyd—your second wife, long forgotten L'onee will try to do more for you as the opportunity occurs—but now, quick, out onto my balcony, and down across the courtyard to the screer pens, and—"

Her voice trailed; her eyes widened and flicked beyond Holroyd's shoulder. Holroyd half turned; and the arrow from Tar's bow whisked past his head and buried itself in the woman's left breast.

For a moment she stood rigid, then she smiled at Holroyd, a tender, eager smile. Holroyd caught her as she crumbled, heard her mumble:

"Just as well that this body die. It would remember—too much. Good luck!"

Behind him, Tar was shouting: "Hurry, man, get into these clothes. We're leaving right away."

There were other cries in the vague distance, somehow unreal yet galvanizing.

His memory of her was of a rather plumpish young woman, from whom the flame of life had departed, lying very still on a thick rug.

The memory remained sharp and clear until he was being pulled onto the back of a crouching screer by a dimly seen rider. The hammerlike beat of windmill-like wings, the bang of the wind as the bird flung itself into the cloudy night sky crowded the picture from his mind. And then—

There was a wailing cry from the driver of Holroyd's screer. "I'm hit!" the man screamed. He seemed to throw himself forward on the back of the bird. But somehow he must have slid. And fallen.

When Holroyd reached forward into the darkness where the man had been, there was nothing but an empty saddle. A vague scream floated up from the night below.

He was alone on an uncontrolled screer in a fantastic land.

VI.

The moon came out from behind an enormous cloud. A great orb of moon it was, mightier than Holroyd had ever seen. It was very near, as if Earth and its silver, shining daughter had strained ever since the long-forgotten twentieth century for a closer union, and now here was the glowing result.

The lowering globe looked ten feet in diameter. It filled the night with radiance. In its refulgence Holroyd had his last glimpse of Linn.

The temple town shone softly in the moonlight that bathed it. The temple itself towered white and pure, like a pillar silhouetted in a light of its own. Around it spread the trees of the park, dark and strange. The first circle of buildings began just outside the park. The others spread beyond.

The scene receded into distance. The town became a misty shape on a vast, blurred land.

That was the picture that stayed with Holroyd, the tininess of the town, the immensity of the land.

His mind *left* the town go. His attention withdrew from the *past* it represented, as it had deserted the woman a curiously long time ago. He felt a sudden sadness, a great melancholy. It struck him sharply that he had been striving all these minutes to push out of his mind the image of a human body falling down, down, into night.

He was more shocked than he cared to admit. Death of companion and enemy he had seen often enough, but always there had been the knowledge in the case of friends that he had no personal responsibility, and to hell with the enemy.

But this was friend.

Personally unknown. But friend, come to rescue him. One more body, Holroyd thought darkly, one more shattered bit of flesh seeking its traditional and terrible union with the soil of Earth.

How many men had tumbled reluctantly from heights into that abnormal merging with the land? How many during two hundred million years?

The thought yielded to the rushing wind, the flapping of meaty wings, the night that lasted and lasted. Rage came against the darkness: "Damn you, Ptath, what are you trying to do—balance off seven hundred years in one night?"

It *should* be getting light, Holroyd thought blankly. Why, the temple's inhabitants had been asleep for hours, and he out here on this great airplane of a bird for yet more hours.

But the night went on. Something was wrong, definitely wrong. This incredible flight through an endless darkness. He tried to picture it: Himself on an impossible flying beast hurtling through night toward—

Toward what?

In the great, rushing dark, Holroyd shifted uneasily in his saddle. L'onee, whoever, *whatever* she was, had said she would help him again. Was this some version of that help?

It seemed hardly probable. Because she had also told him that he must go to the Nushirvan front, and attack and destroy the outlaw State.

Holroyd's mind poised there, ruefully.

He must attack Nushirvan with its population of five billions, its endless mountains, its powerful and cunning fighting men.

Holroyd laughed curtly. The harsh sound of that wry laughter was snatched from his lips by the whining wind, and lost in the vast night.

But the thought remained; and after a moment he knew what she had meant and why it was possible.

In all ages a few men with wills of iron and personalities to match, ruled, and made the decisions upon which the masses of their times built their lives.

Very simply, very starkly, the demigod Holroyd-Ptath must go to the Nushirvan front, take control of all the armies there and blitz Nushirvan before the Goddess Inezuia knew what was happening.

Holroyd drew a deep breath. He'd have to get in touch with the rebel groups, of course. And find out what the pamphlet Tar had shown him had meant in its statement that prayers were the source of the god power of the goddess.

Because, if that was true, then where did Ptath derive *his* power?

Abruptly, he felt the immensity of what was here. The excitement of it figuratively clanged inside him. "A 1944 brain," he thought shakily, "dominating the body of the god of Gonwonlane." His consciousness lifted up, up, to grasp at the wonder of it; his whole being blazed with sensational thoughts.

And the strange, long night lengthened.

Dawn came with tropical swiftness. The sun reared from the horizon behind him, and splashed its light across villages, farms, forests that had in their texture the shape of jungle. A green, prolific land it was.

Far to the north glittered a dark sea, and ahead was a city.

The city was very far away, so vaguely seen that it kept fading into the mist of distance. There seemed to be a monstrous towering cliff beyond it, and—

A cliff? Holroyd frowned. But Ptath was the city of the great cliff. And no scréer could possibly have flown a seven-day journey in one night.

Even as the denying thought came, Holroyd knew better. With a startled consciousness he knew that this was what the endlessness of the night had meant.

Somebody was *pulling* him toward Ptath.

Was it L'onee?

Abruptly, he knew that he couldn't even think of taking the chance. He had to force this beast down. Here. Now. This minute. He—

He felt a sagging sensation. The next instant, like an enormous prey-bound hawk, the screer plummeted toward the distant rim of a jungle.

The land below seemed uninhabited. At the last moment Holroyd had a flashing glimpse of a small, red-roofed house inset in a green shelter of spreading palm trees; and then the massive bird had flashed over the low line of jungle beyond.

It came down in a clearing, ran at top speed, flapping its wings madly. As it came to a plunging halt, Holroyd saw for the first time the tufts of feathers on its ribbed, leathery neck.

The sight struck him sharply, brought a ponderous wonder as to the screer's twentieth-century ancestor.

But the development of flesh and bone was too radical; the physical structure would probably require the most detailed scientific investigation—not by

him who had never been able to recognize by sight more than a few dozen birds. He—

The reverie ended as a silvery voice spoke from somewhere behind him:

"You would be wise, Peter Holroyd —Ptath—to climb down."

Holroyd twisted in his saddle. A girl stood in a narrow pathway twenty-five feet away. There was a quiet earnestness in her dark eyes, a sadness in her olive-complexioned face, and a fire of personality that was unmistakable.

"Hurry!" said the voice of this new L'onee. "The flying screer does not linger long in one place untended. Be careful not to walk in front of it. It will not hesitate to peck at you.

"Besides," she finished urgently, "we, you and I, Ptath, have but a brief hour together. There is no time to waste, none at all."

As he slipped to the ground, Holroyd experienced the first tendrils of a wriggling embarrassment. It was hard to put a mental finger on that squirming sensation, but after a moment he managed it.

Ptath! Her utter acceptance of him as Ptath, regardless of the alien ego of Holroyd which had dominated the Ptath body now for hours and hours.

That domination was almost literally complete. It was so complete that there was not a stirring in him of difference. Ptath was Holroyd. It was a Holroyd, perhaps, who took the reality around him a little too much for granted, a Holroyd who might have been on his way to the Gonwonlanian equivalent of a madhouse if he had actually been in his *own* body.

But, except for that, the merging of god and man into man was so thorough that even the god memory had a dream-like quality.

It was the supremacy of his personal identity that made the woman's intimate acceptance of him confusing as he walked toward her, slowly.

She had not moved from her first position. Her eyes were dark and luminous; her black hair hung down the back of her head cascade fashion, but it was not well combed. Her face was pretty and young in a rough, countrified manner. She was definitely only a girl, her body well built on youthful lines.

Holroyd saw that she was watching his survey of her, a faint, enigmatic smile on her lips.

"Pay no attention to this form, Holroyd," she trilled finally. "It is that of a peasant girl named Moora who lives with her father and mother a quarter of a kanb from here."

Paying no attention to her was easier said than done. She glowed with life. When she turned to walk along the trail her movement had in it such a springiness of youth, such an easy grace, that Holroyd stopped and stared.

Hurriedly, however, he fell into step behind her, treading the narrow path wordlessly for several minutes. But at last:

"Where are we going?" he asked. "And what about the screer?"

No answer. They were deeper in the forest now. Trailing vines hung down from the trees. And so dense was the leafy foliage overhead that the long, slanting rays of the morning sun did not penetrate the gloom in those depths. It was a silent world of half light.

"How is it," Holroyd called, "that I reached the city of Ptath in one night's flying?"

"Wait with your questions," came the silvery answer. "As for the screer, you need it no more."

The walk kept on. Holroyd thought of how the night just past had lasted and lasted; and his sense of danger increased; the consciousness that every minute that unfolded could bring titanic surprise grew strong.

Was he, who had been lured into a dungeon, following without question the woman who had lured him into it?

"See here—" Holroyd began. And let his words trail.

The pathway that had been so con-

fining, was widening; a clearing spread out and there, a little to Holroyd's right, was the small building he had seen from the air.

No sign of life showed. And over everything lay a profound stillness.

The silence extended to the house. It was a one-story structure, nice-looking, a design of skillfully cut wood. It looked neat, as if pleasant, wholesome people had lived there.

Had lived.

The deserted effect was relieved by the fact that there was a rug runner in the outer hallway. Standing on the threshold, Holroyd looked first at the alcove that opened at the right to what must be the living room; and then he looked slantwise at the girl.

"I am glad," she said earnestly, "that you are cautious about entering. But think! It was necessary that I trick Ptath into entering the temple dungeon in order that Holroyd might be reborn. As for the rest, be assured that I will go first wherever I ask you to go."

It wasn't, Holroyd told himself, that he had had any real doubt once she herself had entered, but—

But why was he here at all?

He shook his head dubiously. Then gave his attention to his surroundings. The living room was scantily furnished. There were hard chairs, a rug, a chest, a table, a wooden light stick hanging from the ceiling and in one corner on a dais—

A glowing metal bar. It extruded from the center of the dais. It shone with a dull violet radiance. Holroyd saw that the girl was following his gaze.

"A prayer stick!" she said. "Oh, Ptath, I—"

Prayer stick! This then was the source of the Goddess Ineznia's god power. Holroyd moved toward the dais, eyes wide, intent. How did it work? Just what did it do?

He turned toward the girl in a blaze of curiosity—and realized that she was still talking:

"Moora's parents are away, and we are alone, Ptath, you and I alone for the first time in . . . in—"

She hesitated, then sighed. "The time," she went on wearily, "has no meaning. It is so long that I have died a hundred million deaths for need of you, so long, and yet, Ptath, my great pride is that I have been faithful."

Her voice trilled on, more eagerly now: "Once more I shall be all women for you. Today, you can claim me as a peasant girl named Moora; tomorrow I shall be the beautiful girl from the silver city of Trinano, whom you see by chance in the street; the day after that a fancied lady of the court shall lie in your arms, and once more it will be really I, your happiest wife. Thus it was with us in the old days; so it will be again. Of course there is first of all this wretched business of Ineznia."

Holroyd hardly heard the last sentence. It was what went before. Every word was still quivering in his brain, the meaning of every syllable as distinct as the print in a book.

The hard, bright thought came that no blitz soldier should feel at a loss in a situation like this, except—

"But look here," he heard himself say, "do you mean to tell me that you actually used to take possession of other women so that—"

He couldn't go on. He saw that the girl was staring at him. There was a moue of disappointment wrinkling her lips.

"Oh, Ptath," she chided, "it is you who have changed if you find wrongness in what we did of old. You were the philanderer. I but yielded to your desire. It is your will and yours alone to which I shall conform always."

There was nothing to say to that. The justice of the reproof was only exceeded by the strange pliancy of character revealed by the confession. A woman who catered to every abnormality of her husband's lusts. L'onee, Holroyd thought, L'onee, what feet of clay you have. No wonder your real body is lying en-

chained in a palace dungeon, prisoner to someone who looked at least a little bit beyond pleasure.

"Look," Holroyd said slowly, "you didn't bring me here just to make love to you. And, besides, I want to know how you did it. How did that screer fly so straight to where a peasant girl waited beside a clearing in a jungle?"

"Another thing," he pressed on, "that accident of the driver falling off the screer—*was* that an accident?

"Wait!" His voice was a resonant force. He waved violently toward the dais. "This prayer stick! How does it work? It seems to be made of metal, almost looks like steel. And the funny part of that, when I think it over, is that it's the first metal I've seen since coming to Gonwonlane."

He finished: "Well?"

Her expression was quiet now. A shadow of a smile touched her eyes and then was gone. But Holroyd did not miss the faint amusement. Better watch out, he warned himself. This woman's character was undoubtedly more complicated than any single facet of her might indicate.

After a moment she had still made no answer.

She stood studying him; and it was very curious, the intent expression in her eyes. As if she was considering his reaction to something that was still only in her mind.

Abruptly, she walked over to the dais, from which protruded the prayer stick. She beckoned Holroyd, and there was an odd commanding note in her voice, as she said:

"Take my hand, and I will show you how the peasants pray. It is important that you learn about this, as it is from the totality of billions of such sticks as this that god power is derived."

Holroyd shook his head. He had no sense of making an abrupt decision. The will, the consciousness had been growing on him; and now, quite simply, he knew that he was not taking another step forward that involved collaboration with anybody or acceptance of anybody's statements.

He had been rushed along with a blinding speed. That was over. Above everything else he needed a few days to think things over, orientate himself, and plan his future actions. He grew aware that L'onee must have realized the reason for his reluctance. She came hurrying back to him.

"Don't be foolish," she said earnestly. "There's no time to waste. Delay of any kind might be fatal."

There was nothing to say to that. Beyond doubt dangers existed. It didn't matter. It was simply not in his nature to go on charging forward into the unknown.

His silence must have seemed like hesitation. The girl, with an impatient gesture snatched his hand, and pulled at him.

"Come," she urged. "No matter what else you do, you must learn about this."

Her strength was surprising, but Holroyd disengaged himself with a quiet finality.

"I think," he said, "that I am going to pay a visit to the city of Ptath before I do anything else."

He turned, and without a word, without waiting for her to speak, walked into the hallway and out of the house.

Twice, while the tiny place was still visible, he looked back. But there was no movement, no sign of life.

Silent as a house of evil, it stood in the light of the early-morning sun and vanished from his sight as he plunged into the dense undergrowth.

VII.

The jungle was warm and muggy, and it took about an hour of steady westward walking to break out of it.

Holroyd stopped short. He had come into the open on a hillside and there was a long line of hills facing him, barring any view he might have had of the

city of Ptath. To the north was a dark, glittering sea.

But he scarcely noticed that.

It was the valley below that held his attention. The valley was a military camp. It swarmed with men and beasts and buildings—and women.

The presence of the women puzzled. But after a moment that wonderment cleared. Of course! This was a permanent encampment, with establishments for married men.

Maneuvers, or some kind of training, seemed to be in progress.

He watched the unfamiliar pattern of action for a while. There seemed to be a lackadaisical quality about everything. The grimb-mounted cavalry galloped in a leisurely fashion, the riders carrying long wooden lances, and they had a habit of swerving their beasts out of line before a group of women, conversing for a minute, and then cantering off after the main body.

It looked disgraceful, even from a distance, though there was probably an explanation for it.

As far as Holroyd could see in either direction along the valley were soldiers and buildings to house soldiers, shining white in the sun.

There was nothing to do but cross the valley. If he avoided Ptath's acquisitive tactics, he should be able to thread his way without even being noticed.

He estimated the distance at five miles —an hour and a half.

He was about a third of the way across, passing quietly near a group of men and women, when there was a thunder of heavy paws. A long line of grimbs soared by within ten feet of Holroyd.

Most of the riders looked at him curiously. But one man, a tall, fancily dressed chap, with colorful feathers in his Alpine-type hat, stared in blank astonishment, then reined his great beast out of the line. He bowed low in his saddle.

"Prince Ineznio!" he cried. "Your unprecedented surprise visit will thrill the army; I shall inform the marshal at once."

He whirled away toward the nearby group of men and women, leaving Holroyd—memory of what the temple prince had said—on the road: that Ptath resembled, not only the statue in the temple, but a man called Prince Ineznio.

Not until this moment had that vaguely remembered remark even remotely suggested danger.

Holroyd examined his situation with narrowed eyes. The valley was a world of movement of men and animals. There were buildings and soldiers behind as well as in front, and on every side of him. And coming toward him was a throng of officers and their women.

There was no way out, utterly nothing to do but try to carry off the mistaken identity.

After a minute the possibilities of that were positively gigantic.

Why . . . why, if these people accepted him as Ineznio, he could learn from them the details of the army's make-up; and then: the Nushirvan front!

His brain raged with the thought, the conviction that he could do it.

Who would dare to doubt an unkillable man?

He felt a sudden burning pride, an impatience with fear and caution, an intense, eager excitement.

Abruptly, the details of the impersonation ceased to be important, the almost certainty that his voice would not resemble that of Ineznio. It didn't matter. He was Ptath, thrice greatest Ptath, *the* Ptath of Gonwonlane.

The identification clanged in his brain. With a savage confidence he watched as the group of officers and ladies reached him, paused, bowed low and—

And waited.

Waited, obviously, for acknowledgment.

Holroyd gave it, ringingly: "I am

here to see maneuvers, details of training. Let them proceed."

It was superbly done; only it was not Holroyd who had done it, but Ptath. No, not even Ptath exactly. It was the thought of Ptath's identity that had brought the arrogant response.

Ptath was becoming more valuable, more integrated, every hour.

He saw that the group, having been recognized, was at ease. The women were mostly young and good-looking; they eyed him with a frank interest. Several of the officers, one of them with ten white feathers and five red streaming from his alpine hat, came forward.

The man was strong-faced, middle-aged; he said quietly:

"We are honored, lord. You will probably not recall our meeting at the palace when I was introduced to you. I am Marshal Nand, commanding the 9430th reinforcement corps, which is shortly to proceed to the Nushirvan front. We—"

His voice went on. But in spite of all Holroyd's will to listen, he couldn't. The flush of Ptath's personality began to fade. His mind was bobbing like a cork in storm-tossed waters, at once stunned and absorbed.

The nine thousand four hundred and thirtieth army corps. Back home an army corps comprised anywhere from forty to ninety thousand men. His own impression was that he had seen more men than that in this green, luscious valley. But suppose it was the smaller figure.

Forty thousand men in one corps out of nine thousand four hundred thirty meant roughly ninety-four million times four—four hundred million men.

The shock dwindled. Actually, it was a small army for a country with a population of fifty-four billion.

Nushirvan alone, with its five billion population, should be able to place one billion men into the field of battle.

Holroyd drew a deep breath. There was a fascination inside him, a soldier's singing fascination at the military potentialities of such vast and terrible armies.

He thought: Trained to blitz tactics, with screers as planes, and grimbs as tanks—

He shook with excitement.

Every minute the tremendousness of this vast land was becoming more apparent—the importance of staying alive, and living, actually living here, as he would have to do.

Holroyd-Ptath, the god ruler of Gonwonlane—

"And if you will come this way, most high excellency," the marshal was saying, "I will have typical units perform for your benefit. Of the three hundred and fifty thousand officers and men in my corps—"

"Of the *what?*" said Holroyd. But he didn't say it out loud.

He was aware of himself falling into step beside the heavy-faced marshal, his brain once more reeling out at a tangent. His original estimate must be increased ninefold. Thirty-six hundred million men not counting army corps above the 9430th.

Here were nearly twice as many soldiers as there were human beings on the earth of 1944—the greatest army in the greatest land that ever was.

His army, *his* land, if he could but grasp it; if he could but frustrate a goddess' schemes, a goddess' ambition—and take what was his.

Beside him, a woman's voice said softly: "I am here, Ptath, in a new body, to help—to advise—you."

Oddly, the woman's words had a queer effect. They brought revulsion, a sense of having had unwholesome thoughts; Peter Holroyd, American, owning a world—damned undemocratic hound!

But he was also Ptath!

To hell with that, Holroyd thought grimly, and then, more blankly: He'd have to fight the insidious encroachments of the character of Ptath. The only thing was—

Could he? Could he hope to defeat that strong and elemental will?

The doubt made him cold with anger as he twisted to glance at L'onee's new body. He calmed slowly. Her new form was that of a plump, middle-aged woman, and the selection interested him. Before he could speak, L'onee whispered again:

"I'm Marshal Nand's wife. His mistress is over there to your left—don't look now. Ptath, the army must be transformed and reorganized. Ptath, women were not allowed in army training camps until a few years ago when Inezmia decided to destroy you.

"She wanted to make sure that the army was not in condition to launch the attack you would have to make on Nushirvan just in case you ever got into position to make it.

"But the rebel officers have resisted the deterioration, and so the army's basic condition is much better than she thinks."

"My dear," came the marshal's voice from the region of Holroyd's other shoulder, "you mustn't whisper to his highness."

"I was telling him something very important," the woman pouted. "Wasn't I, Prince Inezmio?"

Holroyd smiled, nodded. He felt, suddenly, immensely better. The quick, smooth reply of the woman thrilled him. This was life unfolding around him, moment by moment.

L'onee's character had a lot in it that he didn't like— But she *was* trying to help him. He tried to picture that, all that it meant. She had said her true body was imprisoned in a dungeon.

It was curiously hard to imagine the reality of that. He would have to rescue her, of course. Just how or when was as dim now as had once been the how of his attack on Nushirvan. He didn't even know where she was imprisoned. And she couldn't tell him.

Actually, the attack on Nushirvan wasn't any nearer. But it had been impossible. Now, a way seemed open, in the far distance of time.

Perhaps a similar opportunity might occur in regard to L'onee's body.

"Ptath!" It was L'onee again. "You mustn't stay here any longer. You have

seen all that is important. You know the main faults of the army: lack of discipline largely due to the presence of a mistress in every soldier's hut, a situation deliberately created by the goddess in her will to destroy you.

"Now that you know this basic truth, you cannot waste any more time here with one twenty-thousandth of the army that must be changed. I swear to you every hour, even every minute, is vital.

"Remember, Ptath, my body is lying in a dungeon darker than that which held you for such a brief period. If *she* should find my flesh untenanted, she could destroy it—and she would, instantly—and then only you, in your full strength, could again render me capable of being a pole of power.

"Ptath, for my sake as well as your own, let me take you to the next phase of what you must learn in your fight to save your life, and mine.

"Ptath, let me take you out of here through the realm of darkness."

"The what?" Holroyd ejaculated.

He had listened to her uneasily, almost unwillingly, yet with the half conviction that he *had* seen the main faults of the army; and anything more could only be repetition with details.

Now he stared at her in amazement.

"The realm of darkness?" he echoed.

She made an impatient gesture. "Merely a means of leaving this valley. What you have discovered here is something I would have told you before this day was out. Ptath, this morning is but begun, and yet a large portion of it has been wasted in your personal discovery of two facts: the defects of the army, and that Inexnio is a real person, who resembles you utterly, even to the texture of his voice.

"I could have told you both facts in two minutes. Ptath, spend this morning with me; listen to what I have to say, learn what I have to teach you. And then go to your destiny in your own way. Ptath, say that you will go through the realm of darkness. *You* have to say it. I am too weak to take you by force or I would do so instantly."

Holroyd hesitated, struck in spite of himself.

She was right. Of all his problems since his arrival in Gonwonlane, the greatest was his lack of information. His own reluctance to go on a conducted tour should not exclude a morning spent in question and answer.

Perhaps he had been a little hasty in leaving her so abruptly. Beside him, Marshal Nand said:

"Here we are, prince. Please name the establishment you wish to see in action."

Name the establishment! Holroyd smiled ruefully. Yes, go ahead and name it. Give its technical name so that everybody would instantly realize his easy familiarity with the whole setup.

He faced the woman, whispered hastily:

"I will go through the realm of darkness. Now what?"

The answer was—reality.

At first there was only darkness. It was intense, impenetrable. Yet after a moment he knew that L'onee was beside him.

His awareness grew sharper. Shadows, he thought, he and the woman were shadows flickering in the night.

How far?

The words touched his brain, though they were soundless and not directed at him. He couldn't understand that, just as he couldn't understand how he could catch her thought at all.

It was utterly clear though that he was. His mind was sensitive beyond all human possibility; and he waited tautly with her for the answer.

The reply came from distance. All space and time sighed with that answering thought; echoes surfeited the infinitely black vortex, plunging in all directions faster than the shadowed shape of man and woman.

Farther, slave!

But the years are already long.

They will be longer. On, on!

The night of time deepened. Ages dissolved into the darkness, and the abysmal feeling came to Holroyd that eternity was as near as that all-enveloping night.

He saw that part of the woman's mind was growing appalled. It was his first awareness that her consciousness was in two distinct sections. One portion writhed with impotent fury at the task her body was performing; the other portion was the slave, unresisting, dependent on that master brain somewhere out there in far space.

The lightless paths of the universe rocked with the fears that burned in the servant part of her mind: that all was lost, that hope itself must die in this black nothingness; and her thought came harder, tenser:

How far?

Farther, fool!

But a hundred million years have we gone.

Farther, oh, much farther.

For a while, then, the woman's enslaved mind felt better, calmer, more confident—and the long night ended.

It was strange, the dream of darkness.

Holroyd poised on the shadowed edge of consciousness, puzzled by the curious awareness that was in him. What had happened?

He couldn't quite grasp the reality. He pushed feebly at the unsettling sense of oddness, pushed, too, at the night that washed around him. Finally he opened his eyes.

He was not, as he had thought, lying down. His feet were firmly fixed on the floor; and from where he stood he could see the peasant girl, Moora, standing facing him.

His gaze flicked beyond her, around her, at the familiar vista of the living room of the cottage in the jungle, which he had left hours before.

Holroyd stared, his mind leaping with memory. Back here; she had brought him back here—through the realm of darkness. But how? What—

He said blankly: "Have I been dreaming?"

"It was a memory," said the girl.

That seemed to make no sense at all. Holroyd studied her, but the girlish face was expressionless. After a moment, however, she added simply:

"It was the memory of how Ptath was first brought to Gonwonlane. Only with your permission and during a transport period could I show you what happened. You will agree that it is worth knowing."

Holroyd stood very still, running the picture, the memory, over in his mind.

"But *you* were in it!" he said finally, and for a moment he had an enormous, almost an owlish conviction that he had picked a fatal flaw in the whole story. "In fact, you were the one who actually brought me to—"

He paused, remembering how part of her mind had been enslaved, the other part writhing in furious rebellion against the commands of that remote master voice. He heard the girl saying softly:

"Yes, I was in it, but not willingly. Perhaps now you have a clearer idea of the power that opposes you."

Holroyd nodded, and slowly a grisly thrill coursed along his nerves. Her explanation fitted with what he had experienced, but that realization was something to be accepted, and forgotten.

The woman, the *being* out there in space, who had answered. The Goddess Ineznia! There was no dismissing her: No longer was she just a name, but reality. She—

For the first time, Holroyd realized that he was fighting for his life.

With a quiet deliberateness, Holroyd walked to the dais from which projected the prayer stick. Reaching it, he looked back at the girl, questioningly. Then he motioned at the stick. She nodded instantly and came forward.

Her swift response made Holroyd

smile ruefully. It was possible that he should apologize for having run out on her before, just as she was about to illustrate with this very prayer stick the origin of god power.

He decided not to. Because he had been right. Under the circumstances, knowing nothing, surrounded by strangeness, his refusal to trust a stranger was justified.

There was still risk, but it was dinner, her good will proved by everything she had done. Beside him, the girl said:

"The prayer stick is important. But first I'd like to sum up for you the hard necessities of your existence in Gonwonlane."

Without further preamble, she went on:

"You may have wondered why it is so vital for you to conquer Nushirvan. It is because of the Great Chair of Power. The chair was formerly at the citadel palace but—and note this well—it was moved because the moment *you* sit in that chair you will regain all your power.

"It was moved by Ineznia into the capitol of the Nushir of Nushirvan with the Nushir's permission. Her belief is that she can destroy you before you can hope to reach it.

"Ptath, it is my opinion offered without qualification that only by invasion, using the largest, most powerful armies ever organized can you expect to reach the mysterious, nameless capitol of the Nushir and claim the god chair of Ptath."

The girl paused as if to give weight to every word; then with the utmost gravity:

"The time has come, therefore, for the most dangerous action. At all costs we must retain the initiative; and, as soon as I have shown you the meaning of the prayer stick, I shall explain what I think you should do next.

"Now take my hand."

Holroyd took her hand gingerly. It felt warm, almost tinglingly alive, as if the life force behind it had flame in it, an electric, vibrant fire.

The thought came: what an experience it would be to kiss a woman who was so *alive!*

After a moment he looked sharply at the girl, struck. Had that subtle suggestion flowed from her mind along her arm?

Holroyd shook himself. Ridiculous. He was perfectly capable of having such a thought, and all by himself, too. He watched with somber interest as the girl reached for the prayer stick with her free hand. Just as her fingers seemed about to touch, she paused, and half turned:

"I would like to remind you most urgently that you resemble Prince Ineznio even to the texture of your voice."

"What," asked Holroyd, "has that got to do with—"

He stopped. He stopped because at that precise instant the girl's reaching fingers clutched firmly the violet-tinged metal bar. The fire must have plunged instantly through her other hand that was holding his hand.

It was as if, literally, he was holding a live wire. Holroyd writhed with silent agony. He fought to break free. But there was no strength in his effort. All the strength was in the energy that poured into his body.

He had time to realize that once more he had been tricked.

VIII.

From where she lay huddled on the dungeon floor in the palace, L'onee could still make out the form of the Goddess Ineznia. In the half light, seated in the great chair that Ineznia had brought down especially—days and days before—Ineznia's small, finely shaped body showed moveless. The golden hair that crowned her head glittered faintly.

She crouched there, her head drooped, her arms hung listless—her *essence* obviously still away from her body.

Wait! What was that. L'onee felt the pressure as of a mind-wind blowing out of a vast night. Stronger it grew. And there was something with it, a concrete something.

As L'onee waited, power flashed into the room. The lights that had been low flared more brightly, revealed a man's body in the act of falling to the cement floor.

The body landed with a soft thud. Simultaneously, the golden-haired woman in the chair stirred.

She opened her eyes.

She laughed.

It was a tinkle of sound, softly musical, that ended. Ineznia glided to her feet and stood above the dark woman. Her voice blazed with triumph:

"Ah, sweet L'onee, my plan is working. He thinks I am you, and he has already permitted me to take him through the realm of darkness. Accordingly, the most dangerous of the lesser spells, the necessity for showing him how Ptath was originally brought from the world of Holroyd to Gonwonlane, is now over.

"In addition he has felt the power flow of a prayer stick, not, as Ptath originally planned, a direct flow, but strained through my body, divested of the two energies that were designed to stir his memory."

Her laughter trilled, then faded as she said, almost as if she was calculating out loud:

"I intend to keep him mentally off balance until at least three more of the spells are canceled. After that it won't matter. There are several ways I can *force* him to cancel the sixth, aside from the attack on Nushirvan. As for the seventh, if I can ever get my hands on that chair for examination, I don't think Ptath will have to sit in it."

She finished: "I almost forgot, L'onee dear. I have included your name in a large list of people to be executed, which list he is going to be asked to sign. I don't really expect him to sign; the list has another purpose, to provide one more reason why he will consider the attack on Nushirvan imperative."

L'onee was silent, fascinated. She stared at her tormenter with a genuine curiosity. The child face of the other was twisted with triumph; Ineznia's eyes were wide and glittering, her mouth slightly parted. Passion showed in every contorted line of her expression, yet withal her face showed alertness, strength and capability.

L'onee thought wearily: Two spells gone. Two of the seven canceled. She could picture how skillfully it had all been done: Ineznia, posing as L'onee, actually gaining Ptath's confidence even as she broke one by one the spells that protected him from final death.

L'onee sighed. It cost her the sharpest effort to force an overtone of her old, threadbare sardonicism into her voice, as she said at last:

"So you pretended to be me. Poor Ineznia! What a difficult role it must have been. And has he made love to you yet, Ineznia dear? Have you broken *that* Ptath spell?"

The golden woman shook her head grimly. "I don't mind telling you of my temporary failure. The fool is a moralist."

"But so was Ptath, remember!" L'onee's voice was richer, tinged with a malicious note. "He would have none of your sneaking off into other women's bodies."

She saw that she had struck fire. Ineznia was breathing heavily. Her eyes flashed a blue flame of anger. Then she laughed, a bright, brittle laughter. And said:

"Enjoy your empty taunts if they give you pleasure. What you do not seem to understand is that I have Ptath here in Gonwonlane, ages before he would normally be due. And what is more, he is controlled by a human mind, a strong mind to be sure, but one which cannot possibly adjust to Gonwonlane in time to interfere with my plans.

"He will wake up tomorrow thinking

that I believe him to be my lover Prince Ineznio, and that *you* made the substitution in order to show him the urgency of an attack on Nushirvan. Not for long will he resist the wave on wave of psychological forces that I am preparing against him. As for the second spell, the necessity that Ptath recognize my god rights by making love to me—"

Her laughter came exultant, confident, aglow with vibrant life. There was a very fire of passionate determination in that burst of good humor. She went on:

"Do you think that he will resist me, *me*, when I suggest that he, as Prince Ineznio, make love to me? He will think that his only hope while he is in the palace will be to keep up the pretense that he is Ineznio.

"Perhaps now you are beginning to understand why I have coddled that fool Ineznio all these years, even to the extent of allowing him the male form of my own name. His resemblance to Ptath's ever-recurring body made it immeasurably worth while.

"And now, L'onçe, I must go. I am taking him to Prince Ineznio's apartment; and there he will return to consciousness some time tomorrow morning. I'd like it even sooner than that, but I have been disturbing the fabric of time, and must now strive for balance."

As she turned away, the stone door opened, and four men came in. They fell to their knees, bowed to the floor, then rose and picked up Holroyd's body. The goddess followed them to the door, then paused, turned:

"I want to warn you," she said softly. "I have had to use you as a pole of power, and the result is that for the first time in ages you have a little power. Don't leave your body. I shall come back here from time to time, and if I discover that you are absent I shall utterly destroy your form.

"I need hardly tell you how fatal that would be for you. You would then be dependent on whatever power you still had, and that would gradually weaken. Eventually, you would not have the strength to leave any body that you might have entered, and would die with it after a prolonged period of agony.

"As you know, also, it is impossible for you to gain entrance to the flesh of any person in the palace without my being instantly aware—so govern yourself accordingly.

"One more thing!" The smile on Ineznia's face was curiously earnest. "I know that you have some vague hope that Ptath arranged his spells in such a fashion as to trap me. If I discover so much as one trap anywhere along the line—and I assure you I will know instantly—I shall immediately destroy Ptath's present body, and try again in his next reincarnation.

"But I shall not fail. I shall be the sole and eternal ruler of Gonwonlane. I leave you with this pleasant thought."

This time she did not pause, but continued on through the door. Instantly, the room was plunged into Stygian darkness.

For long, the dark woman lay almost blank-minded, conscious only of the damp stone and of the chilling weight of chains.

A thought formed at last: Boastful fool, Ineznia. So he's in Prince Ineznio's apartment. And, yes, Ineznia, you're right. I have a little power at last, enough to kill him now, so that he could be born again.

It was hard getting out of her body, harder than she had expected. The strain of keeping that human form of hers alive was almost too much for her meager resources. The dungeon was too cold. Every minute of life, every degree of warmth had to be fought for.

But she was out, and aware of her body lying beneath her in a visionless blackness. For there could be no normal senses, no eyes, no ears, no touch, in this formless state, only that superb still-

buoyant power that was the very core of her *essence*.

Time was, long ago, when her body had remained controllable from distance, when *she* was out. But the strength that made that possible had long since been drained from her.

Getting through the walls was easy enough; and she knew the way. How often in the far past she had floated down that depth of cliff toward the distant, smashing waters to the whirlpool that tossed human suicides and luckless drowned ones like driftwood onto the rocky shore, only to carry them out to sea at high tide.

Slow, now! The sense of water was near and strong. Too strong. She must be out too far. So move in!

She had the shore line finally, the water tugging at her from one side, the quieter land from the other.

Twice, something else came in, a feeling of difference. But each time it was so feeble that death must have been there long ago. And then—she had her body.

Just how long the girl had been dead, it was impossible to say, but the aura of life that suffused from her countless still living cells was strong, almost coarse, compared to the gentle pressure from the sea and the land.

She hovered sightlessly.

She was in, her essence spreading out along the dead nerves. The body lay around her, resisting life with all the quiet strength of an inert mechanism. It was like moving in quicksand. Death for human beings was so final, so complete.

How long she lay there in that timeless night she could not begin to reckon. There *was* no time, nothing but this

poor, racked body and the soothing restfulness of death.

Awareness of life came first in the vague throb of waters rumbling against a rock-pierced shore. Then there was a tingling that would have been pain, except that she held it from her consciousness and waited. Slowly, she grew aware of the gravel and rock and sand pressing against her new body, and then movement, legs yielding to sustained muscular pressure, arms twisting, a host of normal functions shattering the unmovement of death.

Sight came last. She saw the night, a distorted reach of cloud-filled sky and towering cliff. A ledge held her body between the cliff and the rippling chasm that was the sea; and there were other shapes of bodies—and there was the city of lights across the gulf.

She fought off the nostalgia that sight of the city brought, and forced action upon those resisting limbs. For a while, then, she stood swaying, half slumped against the cliff that loomed so immensely into the night above her; and the thought came that no human muscles could ever hope to climb that fantastic precipice.

But shirking was not possible. She must kill to save. She found the weapons where she had hidden them during those occasional melancholy trips when, tiring of her dungeon, she had walked this rocky shore where so many drowned people paused for a mindless rest before being swept out forever to the ancient sea.

How long ago seemed, and was, that last walk.

She powered the weapons and began to climb.

The night dragged. The clouds drifted over the sea to the northwest; and for a while the stars shone down on her where she strained against the gigantic height of the cliff.

A sudden wind whirled in crazily from the northwest; and the clouds came racing back, blacker now, as if they had gone to the source of rain with the one purpose of coming back to torment her.

The rain came down heavily and washed her face, and did wet, cold things to her arms and body; and when it ended finally the dawn that emerged from the clouds was already well advanced.

The sun came up in a blaze of red into a haze-filled horizon. There was distance below her now, but still that titanic precipice stretched on above her, unconquered, demanding yet more strength, more endurance from her weary body.

Death for the man—their only hope—seemed a long, long way off indeed.

IX.

For Holroyd, there was no sense of time passage. One instant he was struggling against the energy that flowed with such appalling violence through his body from the hand of the girl; the next second—

Awareness came that he was lying on the rugged floor of a large room, a strange, sunlit room.

It glittered at him softly. It was two hundred feet long and a hundred feet wide, at least. But it wore its size with infinite grace.

And, after a moment, he had no sense at all of dimensions. There was only an overall exquisiteness, an emanation of splendor that was shared even by the pattern of windows on the curving expanse of ceiling, through which sunlight streamed.

The furniture glowed at him; flame-patterned rosewood, the chairs and chesterfields and settees full-fashioned, with beautiful woven, matching cloth. The paneled walls shone with the soft blue of some amazing treasure wood.

And at the far end of the remarkable room was a series of gemlike doors, set in a design of stained glass windows. Through these windows, too, the sunshine poured, and there was an illusion of trees beyond—illusion because at that distance, even the clearest portions of

the stained glass did not show a good picture of what was beyond.

In a maze of fascination, Holroyd started to sit up, then slowly sank back again, stunned by the picture the movement brought into his line of vision. Coming toward him was the most exquisite thing in all that marvelous room, a golden-haired young woman.

Just as he had had no time really to observe the room, so now his first impression of the woman was confined to a swift glimpse of intense blue eyes and a slender body incased in a form-fitting snow-white robe; and then her voice came, sweetly urgent and—startling fact—vibrant with anxiety:

"Ineznio!" she said. "What happened? You fell over like a stunned Vrill."

She stopped, and Holroyd had time to focus his mind on one facet of the series of events.

Ineznio!

His brain clung to the name. He thought in a blank agony: "She's put me in the palace, substituted me for Prince Ineznio."

Memory came of what L'onee had said: that the time had arrived for the most dangerous action.

The blaze of comprehension fanned the flame of his courage. Momentarily, still, he felt dazzled by his situation, then confident. He said:

"I tripped. Sorry."

He stood up. He was conscious of the young woman's soft white fingers helping him.

She was strong. Like a lithe young tigress, Holroyd thought as he watched her walk away from him toward, not the glass doors, but to one of several opaque wall doors.

She stood in the open doorway silhouetted against a marble hallway beyond; and she said:

"This morning Benar is going to bring you the lists of those to be executed. I hope that you have now made up your mind to sign them."

Her blue eyes blazed: "It is my will that we make an end of these so-called patriots whose only purpose is to force Gonwonlane into a war with Nushirvan and, later on, Accadistran. I shall return to discuss this further."

She was gone. Holroyd put up his hand as the door closed, as if the action would somehow call her back, as if the movement would conjure an explanation of what she had said—*lists* of those to be executed.

After a long moment his mind was still blank. L'onee had put him into the palace, substituted him in the most dangerous fashion for Prince Ineznio. Why?

To prevent the executions?

Or simply to let him see how vital were the life-and-death matters that hung in the balance.

Only one thing was clear: He was on his own inside the citadel palace.

Holroyd paced the carpeted floor. His immediate purpose, it struck him finally, must be simply an apparent acquiescence to cover his efforts to find out all there was to know about this situation before mapping out his plan of action.

His pacing brought him near the jewellike doors at the far end of the room. And now he peered through. The varicolored glass softened the brilliant sunshine that poured down on a gleaming terrace bright with flowers, on the trees and grass and shrubs that spread beyond; and beyond that again appeared the muted outlines of a city.

Holroyd ran to the doors and flung one open. That city—tantalizing even in the glimpse through the lush verdure of the length of gorgeous garden.

He stepped through the open door. A breeze blew across the terrace. It caressed his cheeks and brought the rich fragrance of a garden in bloom; and there was a tangy smell of salt water.

It enticed; it grew. The part of the city that he could see ran along the shore of a blue-green ocean; and the

whole glittered at him, a vision seen through a shifting network of design, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, through the green foliage of the trees.

He hesitated no longer, but hurried across the terrace and down the wide steps to the greensward, and along the mossy bank of a brook that bubbled out of the ground and gushed under an avenue of trees.

It was the abrupt ending of the brook that brought Holroyd up short. The water simply gurgled, ran over a rocky ledge and vanished. He went cautiously forward, stumbled through some underbrush; and there was a garden walk of the same substance as the terrace; and there was a stone railing about three feet high and an abyss.

The precipice started just beyond the barrier of stone and fell down, down, down— Holroyd could see the path of the brook as it cascaded into that astounding depth.

Half a mile at least. Never was an abyss more accurately called the Great Cliff. At its remote bottom was a rock-strewn tongue of sea. No harbor would that bay ever be, for the thunderous roar of the lashing water came faintly to his ears.

The water raced, in foaming masses, between two rocky points from the vaster ocean beyond, and formed the bay. A mile, two miles, three miles wide it was; and on that opposite shore the city began.

The sea and the cliff that inclosed its fury took their places in the intricate pattern of impressions that was forming in his mind. But for the moment there was only the city.

It was white and blue and green and red and yellow and a myriad merging colors. It shone like a jewel splitting the rays of the sun, only not like that at all. It was a vast spread of cupolas and domes and steeples that blurred toward the distant horizon.

It curved along the shore of that blue, enormous body of water, of which the untamed bay was but a tiny projection, curved into distance. There was a vague blur of forest beyond; and somewhere out there must be the cottage in the jungle from which he had been projected.

Holroyd laughed curtly. He'd have to watch out for that woman L'onee. Twice now she had lured him—

The arrow struck the stone beside him, poised for a moment like a live thing, then fell slowly, but with gathering speed back into the abyss from which it had come.

Holroyd stared after it. He shook his head, puzzled; and then, just in time, he saw the figure on the little ledge fifty feet below him and to his left.

He ducked as a second arrow split the air where his head had been.

He half staggered back. But that one swift glimpse of his attacker had shown a tall, gauntly built young woman.

Holroyd halted, nonplused, a few feet from the stonework. Now that the shock was over, his alarm faded instantly. As he peered cautiously over the precipice again, he saw that the woman was clinging precariously to some dark roots that wormed their way out of the perpendicular wall. The bow that had twanged so viciously at him was slung now over a bony shoulder. And there was a belt around her waist with a sheathed sword hanging from it.

As he watched, her fingers groped for new leverage, and so tense was the action, so mortal her danger, that Holroyd instinctively tightened his muscles and pulled with her.

He called: "Who are you? What do you want? Are you crazy?"

His answer was the raucous scrambling noise and the gulp of labored breathing as the woman clawed foot by foot toward him.

Queerly, Holroyd felt suddenly isolated, an unsettling sense of aloneness, one man against a whole strange world. The city across that darkly writhing bay seemed remote in space, and alien. Without pity for a stranger.

Involuntarily, he glanced back toward the palace. He could see only flashes of it through the green profusion of garden, a long, low, white building. The walls glittered at him. But nowhere was there a sign of movement; and not a sound issued from it, not a quiver of life.

The conviction came that it was old, a lifeless relic from forgotten ages, standing here on high above a restless sea. Old and dead. And only he and this woman who had tried to kill him were real and alive.

He saw that the woman was resting, one arm entwining a thick root. She looked up; and her face, tilted toward him, no more than sixteen feet away, looked so horrible that Holroyd shrank. Before he could think, she said in a harsh, croaking voice:

"Don't mind my appearance. I'm ill from my long climb. And please, you must accept my apologies. I didn't recognize you. I thought I had been discovered by a guard."

There was nothing, actually, to say to that. The excuse was too transparent to deserve anything but a pitying smile. And as the physically immoral Ptath had nothing to worry about from arrows, the problem was simply to find out why this miserable assassin wanted to kill Prince Inexnio, and why she thought an apology would make any difference.

"You'd better climb up here," he said finally. "If you stop now your muscles will stiffen, and you won't be able to start again."

That was army training.

Holroyd watched her as she labored toward him. At ten feet she was a dirty, ragged, wretched-looking creature. Her straggly hair was mud-caked, and her gray shorts and blouse were splotched with grime from the rocks and the spray from the foaming waters beneath her.

The overall effect was of somebody at the utter end of physical strength. Holroyd frowned. What was he going to do with her? He couldn't take the risk of her firing at him again. Ptath's body might be invulnerable, but he did feel pain.

As the woman reached the ledge just below the stone wall, he said quietly:

"Better drop the bow and arrows and the sword down the cliff. I can't let you come up with them. For your own sake do it quick and I'll give you a hand up."

What was he going to do with her?

He saw that the woman was shaking her head. Passion blazed in her voice as she answered:

"I won't give up the sword. I'd rather jump off the cliff than fall alive into the hands of the palace police. I'll give you the bow and arrows. That way you can keep me at a distance. But the sword I keep."

He couldn't argue with such intensity. He took the shakily extended bow and arrows, and after a minute of straining, jerked the young woman up beside him.

No animal could have been faster than she, or more cunning. She started to collapse toward the stone walk. But the action was a ruse that covered the drawing of her sword, the instant lunge of her body toward him.

Holroyd leaped back and, in his surprise, dropped the bow and the quiver of arrows.

She snatched them as she leaped after him, flung them over her shoulder, back toward the cliff. They fell out of sight into the abyss.

And then she was upon him. Her bony body twisted as she thrust her weapon. The lunge missed as Holroyd whipped aside.

He had firmer control of his feet now. But, astonishingly she was quicker than he. She hurled herself past his clutching fingers with utter abandon. Even then she would have missed except that, at that moment, Holroyd became aware of a startling fact:

Her sword was made of varnished wood. *Wood!*

The astounded realization that even

such a weapon was not made of metal slowed him.

The point of the stave caught him on the right breast.

The pain was insignificant, and it was instinct, not purpose, that made Holroyd snatch at the blade. He caught it halfway from the hilt, and with a single jerk tore it from her fingers.

He grew aware that the woman was staring wildly at the weapon. She mumbled in dismay:

"The magic stave—it doesn't harm you."

"The *what!*" said Holroyd. And then he realized what she meant.

The sword blade tingled in his fingers. It was alive with a kind of inner movement. It vibrated like a machine-driven tuning fork. It warmed then burned his hand with the violence of its pulsations.

It felt exactly, in a much smaller degree, the way L'onee's hand had felt as she touched the prayer stick.

Holroyd dropped it as he would have a hot coal.

Before he could recover himself, the woman made one of her fantastically swift movements, snatched the stave from the ground and flung it out over the precipice. Instantly, she whirled to face Holroyd again:

"Listen carefully," she said in a vibrant voice, "the stave should have killed you. The fact that it didn't shows that some of the women out there"—she waved a hand to the far horizon, south and east—"are praying to their prayer sticks.

"A pitfully small number, but"—her tone grew strong and thoughtful—"considering the immense time that has elapsed since women were first forbidden to pray except through their husbands—it seems to offer a hope. Ptath, you must think about that. You must—"

"Ptath!" said Holroyd.

Until this instant he had stood striving to hold his mind tight around the idea that the woman thought he was Prince Ineznio. And every moment he had wondered how Ineznio should be taking her words.

Her identification of him echoed in that dreamy garden with a fateful vibrance.

A stranger knew his secret, and suddenly that seemed so catastrophic that the shock of it was like a neural explosion. It hurt his brain, almost literally. He stared numbly at the woman and the look on his face must have been an unnatural thing. For she said quickly:

"Don't be a fool. Killing me won't help. Pull yourself together and listen carefully: I—might—be able—to help—you. Not here, not now. I've got to leave the palace. So if you will give me an order on the screer pens—"

Holroyd hardly heard the request. It was the suggestion that he was considering murder that echoed back and forth in his brain. He straightened, shivered at the dark urges that raged inside him and was himself. Memory came of what else she had said.

Before he could speak, the woman said: "The order blanks are in your apartment. Just follow me."

Holroyd followed. He had the feeling that this was a dream, this woman who knew him, who had tried to kill him and who now was quite blandly, and correctly, assuming that he would let her go without a word of protest. Through the glass doors, and then—

Holroyd watched somberly as the woman slipped with easy familiarity through a door into an adjoining chamber. She emerged with a sheet of stiff, embossed paper, a curious glass-pointed, long-handled pen and a dull metal ring.

"You'd better put this on," she said, extending the ring. "It's the great seal of Prince Ineznio, and gives you authority second only to that of Ineznia herself."

Holroyd suppressed an impulse to deny her identification of him, her casual

assumption that, beyond all doubt, he was not Ineznio. It was too late for denials.

He took the ring. He found himself noting meticulously that she had referred to the goddess by her first name. He thought: "Who is she?

"Not L'onee? Her personality was too human, so much less dramatic, and besides her actions were at wild variance with the whole scheme of things L'onee.

"But then—who?"

The woman finished writing. "Just press your ring here," she said quietly.

Holroyd obeyed without a word. But the queasy thought was in his mind of what this could mean: a woman who knew him, at large— He would be a million times safer if someone would take her out and shove her over the cliff.

He pictured himself doing it. And realized he was wasting his mind even thinking about it. Nevertheless—

He couldn't let her leave without finding out who she was, and what it was all about.

With abrupt, stiffening purpose he

picked up the document, held it away from reaching fingers, and he was parting his lips to utter the first question when a sharp knock sounded on one of the opaque corridor doors.

As Holroyd turned with a start he felt the paper snatched from his fingers. He half whirled, made a grabbing gesture. But the woman was running at top speed toward another of the corridor doors.

She flung it open; Holroyd had a glimpse of marble corridors beyond, and then the woman was pausing, turning. She stood there, silhouetted, a tall, gaunt ungainly female dressed in a ragged, sun-suitlike outfit, with bare, mud-discolored legs. She said:

"I'm sorry, Ptath, that I can tell you so little. My lips are sealed, so sealed that . . that—"

She seemed to have difficulty with her voice, for she almost choked. When she spoke again her tone was more earnest:

"Ptath, she is more dangerous than any of her present actions or words can possibly indicate. Beware!

"Ptath, whoever you are, whatever the identity of your ego, if you can recover the full power of the godhood of *the* Ptath, it will be your power, yours, yours to do with as you will. Of all the things you must do, recover that power first. Think of noth—".

Once again she seemed almost to choke. She shook her head grimly, tried again, and then smiled wanly.

"You can see," she finished, "that I won't be much help to you—here. Good luck, Ptath."

The door closed behind her....

Holroyd stood there. He could hear the knocking on the other door again. But he felt a vague impatience with it, a sense of being irritated by petty matters.

It took a moment to realize why it was whoever was knocking, didn't matter.

He was Ptath. For the first time since coming to the palace, actually for the first time anywhere, that knowledge had been brought home to him in a personal way.

Holroyd was Ptath. Any victory that materialized for Ptath was *his*. He must win.

He had a sudden thrill of tremendous destiny that ended as another knock sounded. He shrugged. "Come in," he said.

A tall, powerful woman carrying a spear entered briskly. She presented the spear before her face and clicked the heels of her hard sandals. She said:

"The merchant Mirow, great Ineznio. He says that the goddess herself has sent him to you. Shall I admit him immediately?"

Holroyd stood cold, becoming colder, steelier. His indifference was almost a concrete force. A merchant. In projecting him here, L'onee must have known there would be Mirows. She must have meant him to meet them, to learn something from them.

He would learn.

X.

The coming of Mirow began with the sound as of a bellows wheezing through a faulty nozzle. The sound moved from some hidden point beyond Holroyd's line of vision, heaved obscenely nearer, and revealed itself as the stentorious breathing of an enormous, ugly-fat man.

The human barrel of lard waddled through the door, bowed from the waist with an elephantine lack of grace, and said servilely:

"Great Ineznio!"

Holroyd stared icily: "Well?"

Utterly amazing was the change that came over the creature. The politeness dropped from him as if it had been a mask, as if he had received permission to reveal the personality that quivered behind his beefy face.

He closed the door through which he had come; then, like some great slug, he sidled over to Ineznio and a whine

came into his voice as he almost blubbered:

"My lord Ineznio, you are a hard man to get hold of. I've had the Zard's treasure here for three days. I met the goddess in the corridor just now. Her divinity said you'd fix me up today. Can I count on that?"

"Yes," said Holroyd.

He felt remote, uninterested. It didn't matter what it was, or why. He couldn't possibly gather enough details in an hour or a day to add weight to any decision. He saw that the bulbous caricature of a human was bowing, smirking. The fat man said:

"If you will now accompany me to the Hall of Commerce, and put your seal on the delivery scroll in the usual manner—"

There was a corridor, where women soldiers stood with spears guarding doors, then a great white room where a score of men carried sacks to a great stone weighing machine. There were other men, one with a long nose, close-set eyes and an oily manner, and who said:

"This way, your most high excellency. As soon as you are seated we shall begin."

The men kept dumping the contents of the sacks in front of him; rough pieces of dark-brown metallic substance that looked like, and was, he saw, nothing else than raw iron.

Brief interest came to Holroyd. Iron a treasure. Then his observation had been correct. Gonwonlane was metal-starved, what there was—used for religious purposes, for the vital prayer sticks that kept alive the goddess' power. In two hundred million years wasteful man had exhausted the ores of his planet.

He shook himself; he said to Mirow:

"Where is the scroll receipt you mentioned?"

It was the vulture-countenanced man who brought it. The fellow presented it with an unctuous bow.

"Oh, most high lord Ineznio, it must be wearying for one of your station to follow such routine. I shall see to it that we get the full measure of our iron—"

The fat man, annoyingly, followed him to the door, bleating:

"I shall have my messenger tell the Zard that you promised— Ah, here is Benar, the war minister. He will be as pleased as the Zard. Greetings, Benar."

Holroyd nodded vaguely at the oldish, corpulent man who bowed at him. Part of his mind was thinking bleakly: One more of a thousand such as Mirow, to be accepted with awareness.

The old fellow had petulant lips, sagging cheeks, and there were pouches under his eyes; and meeting him was as drab as meeting Mirow and the laborers and the long-nosed vulture of a man. Only—

A more alert, intent portion of Holroyd's mind tightened over the words that had been spoken: The Zard of Accadistran would be pleased—about what? His promise?

He found himself frowning over the puzzling factors involved as he walked beside the old man who was chattering something in a low falsetto. Treasure from the Zard of Accadistran who, according to that rebel pamphlet Tar had shown him was responsible for the outlaw depredations. Treasure in return for a promise and— Beside him Benar's voice grew harsh and blustery; penetrated:

"I'm glad you've agreed. Kill the whole gang; it's the only method—"

"Eh?" said Holroyd sharply. "What was that?"

The old man looked at him, then, pompously: "A surgical operation, that's what's needed. I've got the list ready, every officer who ever spoke twice in public in favor of an attack on Nushirvan—this'll wipe 'em out. It's the only effective way to carry out your promise that our troops won't interfere when the outlaws employed by the Zard

come over and abduct those scoundrelly rebels and their families.

For Holroyd, high disinterest ended.

Holroyd grew conscious of purpose. It wasn't clear; so vague in fact that it was more like a vast unease; the conviction of a man who in pitch darkness has come up against an unscalable wall with passage possible only through total destruction.

He was led into a large room. Strange maps hung on walls. He recognized them: Gonwonlane, Nushirvan, Accadistran—it was all there, in much greater detail than the books had shown. They couldn't hold his attention for more than a glance.

He sat down and stared at a book the size of a large office ledger that lay on the desk before him. It was good to be sitting, for it made possible a mental summation about—a Zard who sent treasure—in return for the right to kidnap Gonwonlanian citizens—without interference from troops—the stupefying treason of a goddess against the people she ruled.

He felt cold and deadly without anger. This was what L'onee had meant. This was why he was here. She had thought he didn't comprehend the importance of the attack on Nushirvan. And it was true. He hadn't. The man Benar was speaking:

"As you can see, a large list. We didn't miss a single suspect."

The queer feeling came to Holroyd that the comment of the war minister was designed to draw a compliment. The list, the other's manner suggested, deserved praise for its very size. The man looked smug. His eyes glowed expectantly on Holroyd.

Holroyd had no thought now. He put one hand out tentatively and flipped the book open, approximately in the middle. The page thus revealed was covered with almost microscopic writing—seven, eight, nine, ten columns of names.

And—he counted one column with all the preciseness of suppressed emotionalism—forty names to each column meant four hundred to the page.

He leafed the page over and sighed gently. It was written, as he had expected, on the back side also, just as finely, with just as many names.

It would be interesting to know the number of pages. Not that it mattered. The crime of murder that was contemplated here could not possibly gain by any reduction to exact figures. Nevertheless, he put the question.

"Eighteen hundred pages," the old man replied. "I tell you, sir, we've been thorough. We'll stamp this disloyalty out utterly."

Four hundred times eighteen hundred, Holroyd thought painfully. Four hundred times . . . . times— The answer wouldn't come. It wasn't as if his mind was weighted with emotional barriers either—

Realization came that he had been asked a direct question. What—did he think—of the—list?

Well, what did he think of it? There it was. Eighteen hundred by four hundred—no, that wasn't the way things were measured: sixteen inches by ten inches by four.

The answer to that came like a flash: six hundred forty cubic inches of dead men.

Holroyd reached forward gravely, lifted the volume. Heavy, about eight pounds. Well, there it was. Most of the figures were now in. Judgment should be simple.

What *did* he think of it?

It was the continued heaviness of the book in his fingers that brought the thought. He heard himself say:

"I'll take the book with me." He felt quite casual. "There are a few names, you know, that I must check, make sure they're not on it. It will take a little time to recollect them."

He was turning away with a complete conviction that everything was explained when the man's pained voice stopped him:

"I assure you, sir, the lists were very carefully checked against the names of all officers who have been introduced in high circles, or otherwise called to your attention. Only such agreed-upon names as General Maarik, Colonel Dilin and others were left in."

Holroyd looked at the old lecher. His mind was like sheet steel. It was obvious that this situation required a surgical operation.

"I'll take the book to my apartment," he said freezingly. "I'll study it there."

He turned and walked into the corridor. He reached the apartment. He was inside, closing the door behind him, before he saw the golden goddess.

She was sitting at a little glittering table that had been set up just inside the great stained windows and doors. The table had gleaming dishes on it. The goddess said:

"Sit down, Ineznio. I want to talk to you about the executions. The minister of police made a suggestion a little while ago that fascinates me. As a result I am thinking of sending you to the Nushirvan front to launch a false attack there that will satisfy all the malcontents.

"But sit down, my dear, and we shall discuss the campaign over a cup of nir."

XI.

He had to adjust to that, to her presence, her words. It took time because his mind started from almost blankness, and kept twisting away from the reality she represented.

But it came back. It came back.

Seeing her now was different. Before he had been stunned by the ruthless manner in which he had been projected into her presence. And her own swift departure had left him with only a fleeting impression that nevertheless fitted. Looked back upon, his arrival in the palace seemed like a sketch drawn on a hazy day, needing details to fill in the accurate general picture.

The child's face, the small, finely shaped body, the blue eyes—all were there much as he remembered. In place of the shining white negligee, the goddess wore a trailing gown of deep blue that matched the color of her eyes. But the great difference was that before she had seemed a dreamlike figure. Now she was real. She was alive, here, the Goddess Ineznia.

Her voice came softly: "Sit down, Ineznio. You're very strange this morning, staring at me so thoughtfully."

"I'm thinking over what you said," Holroyd heard himself say.

Actually, he hadn't reached her words yet.

But his answer sounded right.

He seated himself gingerly. He saw that she was regarding him with eyes that held an enigmatic, unchildlike quality in their depths. It seemed to change her appearance, subtly. He found himself striving tensely to discover what was the form of that new difference.

And couldn't.

Realization came more sharply this time that he was staring at her again. He thought: Watch out, you incredible idiot. This is not just a woman.

After a moment it was still hard to grasp that, harder to follow its implications except—

Watch out!

The cautioning thought brought a vague quaver of alarm, the knowledge that he couldn't go on being "strange"; and that he mustn't remain silent any longer.

"So you would like me to launch a fake attack on Nushirvan. You—"

He didn't finish. His mind was pulsating wildly, with utter disregard for coherent comprehension.

"What," he thought, "*what* did she want him to do?"

His brain grew quiet; he could almost feel himself absorbing the meaning of what she had said. He thought finally: "It couldn't be so easy."

But after a moment it was still there; and the woman was saying in a bell-like voice:

"—I will send the messengers announcing that you and your staff will leave for the front tomorrow. All temples will be commanded to hold their forces at your call, and to prepare for housing and handling of transient soldiers. The great central stocks of food and munitions will start moving to the front by every available means. The important thing in launching the attack is to convince everybody that a vast war is being waged, and at the same time to make sure that the known rebels are assigned to the left flank, where they can be cut off by the outlaws, and destroyed in the volcanic marshes and mountains that dominate hundreds and hundreds of square kanbs in that region. But I will show you in a minute exactly what I mean—"

Holroyd heard every word, but not too clearly. He sat in a gentle, personal haze of mind. There was joy in him, and dislike so violent that it hurt his mind. There was an icy rage, and there was pleasure.

The pleasure came last because, though the other emotions promised to be more permanent, they couldn't match in intensity the sheer diabolic happiness that grew out of the proposal she was making: A false attack on Nushirvan.

O Diyan, O Kolla, O divine Rad!

An attack on Nushirvan under the auspices of the goddess, the necessary preparations made without arousing any suspicions anywhere—

The thought trailed. A slim white hand with pointing finger was reaching

across the table toward his head.

"Come with me," the goddess' voice caressed, "and I will show you."

The finger hovered above his forehead. "Hold your head steady, and come with me."

His wild impulse was to jerk back from he knew not what. But he didn't dare. He had time for a bitter consciousness that he should have remembered this was a goddess, a goddess possessing power so great that even L'onee, who had been able to distort the very fabric of time was terrified of her.

The finger touched his forehead.

Come with me!

After a moment he was still there, and the goddess was looking at him, the firm creamy flesh around her eyes drawn into a tiny frown.

"That's very strange," she said. "I feel resis—"

She cut the words with a deliberate click of her tongue. She sat back then and stared at him in unmistakable astonishment.

Holroyd found his voice.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing." She shook her head impatiently, and the effect was curiously as if she was trying to convince herself.

Holroyd waited, shaken. Just what she had expected to happen wasn't clear. But the reason why it hadn't, was.

Dim might be the power of Ptath, compressed now into the personality of Peter Holroyd, but that intimate combination of human and god could not be treated as all human. Whatever she had meant by her invitation to come with her, wherever she had willed that they go, taking Ptath there and taking Ineznio must, by the very nature of things, involve *different* applications of her god power.

He was about to be discovered.

He felt hot, then cold and terribly steady.

"Ineznio, what have you been doing since I saw you last?"

The words were sharply spoken. Holroyd saw that her eyes were glittering at him with a strange, sparkling intensity like dancing blue water briefly caught by a complication of dazzling sunbeams.

It was hard to look at her. Her face seemed lost in a mist of light, light that pulsed and leaped. It seemed to have no source, but grew out of the air around her.

"Since you last saw me!" Holroyd echoed, and his tone was so cool that he felt a thrill. "Let me think!

"First," he began, "I went out into the garden. Returning, I found Mirow waiting to see me. I went with him to check the Zard's treasure; then—"

He stopped; her eyes had changed again. They were round, cerulean pools shadowed like the sea under a sky that had clouded, but with electric-blue sparks in their depths.

And those eyes were staring now, not at his face but at his hand. His left hand. Staring? Nay, glaring.

"Who gave you that?" she said in a piercing tone. *"That* ring?"

"The ring," Holroyd said. He stared at the dull shape too astounded for a moment to say more. He caught his faltering thought. He began: "Why, it's just—"

He was cut off by laughter. A tinkle of sound it was, softly musical. The woman's face, her finely molded, amazingly youthful face grew warm and alive with the rippling play of that delicious laugh. There was only one thing wrong.

Her eyes had changed again. Still blue were they. But fire-blue now. They blazed with a hellish, an unhuman rage.

And her voice had in it the violence of sea storms, the lashing devil-vibrance of the elements. She screamed:

"Who gave it to you? Who? Who?"

"Why, Ineznia!" said Holroyd mildly. He felt shocked, but more than that,

he felt in control of the situation. He stared at her curiously, genuinely interested.

"It's really very simple," he went on, and knew with utter certainty that Holroyd alone could never have been so calm, so reasonable, so fantastically brave in the face of so violent an outburst from such a source.

He explained: "I was on the point of going out with Mirow, when he reminded me I didn't have my seal ring on. In my hurry I must have picked up the wrong one."

It sounded semiplausible. The ring must have been there, in the room from which the gaunt woman had secured the order forms. Though why such a dangerous ring had been given into Prince Inexnio's care was another matter. It—

He saw that the remarkably expressive eyes were changing again. Still blue, but they were steady now. As abnormally steady as was he himself.

And her voice, when it came, was calm, was quiet:

"I must ask you to forgive me, Inexnio. There are forces at work, of which I have not informed you, and I have recently been frustrated in something of great importance. Remove the ring, and then I will take you on the journey of minds. Afterward—"

She smiled, an amazingly tender smile, finished softly:

"Afterward I shall say good-by to you in a manner befitting the separation of lovers.

"But first put the ring away—back where you got it."

Holroyd walked slowly into the room from which the gaunt woman had brought the ring.

Once inside, he had to suppress the impulse to dive for an adjoining door and make off down a corridor.

Grimly, he recognized the emotion. It was the same as that which had suddenly struck him in the little cottage in the jungle. The conviction that too many things were being pushed upon him, and that it was time to get out on his own, and take stock of his situation.

Only he couldn't—dare walk off on *this* woman.

Some time today, he thought, during his first spare moment, he'd have to sit down and figure things out—the curious business of the ring for instance. It—

He cut the thought deliberately. Not now. Later.

The resolve relieved him.

But still he stood, uncertain.

That journey of minds and the love-making that was to follow it—Holroyd shook himself uneasily. The letter was, of course, unimportant. He had reached the age of thirty-three before coming to Gonwonlane, and if ever some superbeing were to compile a list of young men of thirty or over who were white lilies, the name of Holroyd would be conspicuously absent.

No, the love-making part didn't matter, now that there was no question of the body and the woman not being one and the same.

The disturbing thing was—the journey of minds.

What could it be?

Ineznia had been talking about having the rebels cut to pieces in the volcanic marshes and mountains of Nushirvan. And then she said—what had she said?

He couldn't remember clearly.

He'd have to face it, whatever it was. There was no time to think about it now when so many other things were working in his favor.

Satisfied, he placed the ring in a small transparent wall cabinet beside a large desk, and walked slowly back into the room of the great windows.

XII.

The goddess' back was to him as Holroyd walked toward her across the thickly, luxuriously carpeted floor. And so he was able to study her with an objectivity that had not obtained while he was facing her.

She was a small woman, not more than five feet in height. Her hair was her crowning glory. She wore it like a schoolgirl, and its cascading ripples shimmered with a soft, silken, golden luster.

Sitting there, she looked like a child.

The impression ended jarringly as Holroyd saw what she was holding in her lap: the great book containing the names of those whose executions she had desired such a short time before.

Holroyd smiled a pained smile, walked around, and sat down in his chair. The goddess looked up, her eyes thoughtful.

"I notice that you haven't signed this, Ineznio."

Before Holroyd could speak, before he could more than tingle from the first shock, the woman went on in an odd, complaining tone:

"You have never fully appreciated the importance of action against these people. Our whole younger generation is irreligious in the extreme, and self-assured, individualistic beyond bearance.

"A defeat with their main leaders seemingly responsible—our propaganda will have to see to that—and most of those leaders killed—our military tactics will see to that—will frustrate them, leave them no psychological loophole. By skillful exploitation of the opportunity, we can stress that their contempt for prayer was responsible; and so send millions of the weaker-minded back to their prayer sticks.

"After that we may cease to worry. I have discovered that these rebellious outbursts never last more than a few generations. I leave the details to you."

Holroyd sat quiet, then he picked up his cup. The nir was still hot, and it was delicious. But a minute after his first sip he couldn't have described how it tasted.

In his mind's eye, he could see the whole picture she had so swiftly sketched —men, women, their souls hammered by catastrophe, going down listlessly to old age, to gloomy graves, without hope, without a single way to turn, while the golden, immortal goddess lived on, while the temples and their princes and emperors continued to exercise their iron control of a people so hopelessly enslaved that it was like . . . like *hell!*

Almost physically, ferociously, like a horse straining at a bit that was too tight, his mind champed. A dark determination came that it should not be; it would not be. The goddess was speaking again:

"For the most part, as you can see, the executions are now unimportant. But"—her blue eyes measured him—"there is a page here, Ineznio, that I want you to sign.

"Every name on it is that of a person who is known to have committed murder. While they live, the law is insulted, my government put to scorn. You will sign it, will you not?"

Once more she gave him time for thought by rushing on:

"Ineznio, at time you infuriate me. You know as well as I that it has been my policy to permit you and my other —human—advisers to control the administration of government. I am interested only in the larger issues; this is one of them. You must sign this list."

Holroyd stared at her. The long though spasmodic harangue had given him an opportunity to plan his words. He said slowly:

"Don't you think executions at this stage would rouse suspicions on the part of the very people whose minds you want to lull?"

Her answer startled him. There was a pen lying on the table. She snatched it, rippled furiously through the book, found the page she wanted and wrote rapidly in a blank space at the bottom of it.

She finished with a flourish, grabbed the page and tore it out with one jerk.

"There," she blazed, "this postpones all the executions for six months." She pushed the paper across the table and held out the pen. Her eyes glowed at

him. "Does that meet your objections, sir?"

Without a word, Holroyd took the pen. He read the sentence she had written and it was as she had stated.

He signed the single name, Inezmio, and silently handed the sheet back.

Within six months he would have sat in the god chair; in six months he would be Ptath, or he would be dead. Besides—

One page out of eighteen hundred. He couldn't have gotten more easily out of an impossible situation—

A finger touched his forehead. The goddess' voice caressed his ears:

"Come with me!"

XIII.

Blurred movement! That was Holroyd's first impression. He shrank, expecting pain. But there was nothing like that.

The blur lasted seconds, a sense of moving at enormous speed, then, abruptly, the witch sight slowed. Instantly, he was gazing from a height at a vista of mountains. Mountains, mountains—and volcanoes!

As far as that eagle vision could penetrate, the peaks towered to ever new heights, and the volcanoes poured their pall of smoke into the misty sky.

There were hundreds of peaks, hundreds of volcanoes in sight, and vast valleys that hung thick with haze. Steam belched from dark fissures in the hide of the sullen, tortured land.

"Nushirvan," Holroyd thought—and felt his first pang of appalled doubt. "You couldn't send human beings into *that*."

But after a moment he knew better. Mountains could be taken by armies, volcanic land was never as bad as it looked; in fact the soil was usually so rich that vineyards and orchards prospered as nowhere else.

Fascinated, he began an eye search for habitations.

And found them.

Houses crouched against hillsides, nestled in valleys dense with the haze of steam; and in the far distance where a valley ran almost straight toward the remote horizon, he could see the steeples and towers of a city.

He thought instantly with a burning desire: Go there. Let us go there.

No, came the answer. It is impossible. I cannot cross the river of boiling mud.

Why not?

There was no reply to that; and Holroyd felt a brief blaze of impatience; and then—

River of boiling mud! The name, the picture it evoked, caught his imagination.

He peered down; and the strange thing then was that he should have missed it at all.

Snakelike, the gray-dark mass undulated below. In and out along a great valley it wound. It averaged about a quarter of a mile in width, and a faint steam rose from its surface.

Armies coming up from the foothills of Gonwonlane would have to cross it. Once again the shocked wonder struck him like a blow: Could men be sent into such a hell?

And again the knowledge came that they could and they must be. He could even visualize the type of built-in-advance pontoon bridge that could be used—one heavy enough to take monster tanks—or grimbs. There was not a soldier or officer on active service in World War II who had not crossed a hundred such bridges frequently under fire.

On and on the journey of minds continued, following that broad river of mud in a westerly direction. Holroyd found himself estimating the speed of progress at about four hundred miles an hour.

It was just fast enough to keep his interest at a high pitch, his mind working on the basis of his sharp observation, his whole being alert and eager.

Once more he caught a tantalizing

glimpse of a city half lost in the haze of distance. But that, too, lay beyond the river of boiling mud, uncrossable for some reason by this most perfect of all means of reconnaissance.

It was shortly after they passed the second city that the river turned sharply northward. Except for twistings and writhings that threaded around entire mountains, northward was its course thereafter.

Holroyd began to feel puzzled. It was easy to understand the importance of the river where it faced Gonwonlane. But why follow the meandering course of a hot mud moat that seemed to encircle the solid core of Nushirvan?

After an hour it was clear that that was exactly what they were doing. Because gradually that remarkable canal twisted eastward, then after a long time —it seemed long now that his military interest had collapsed—it shifted south for yet more hours.

The sun, which had been high in the heavens, was clinging finally to the very edge of the western horizon, its rays casting long shadows over the strange, terrible mountain land of Nushirvan—when abruptly there was the blurry rush of speed that had begun the trip: and he was back in the palace.

The journey of minds, inexplicable because of the queer course it had followed, was over.

The room was much, much dimmer. Its great windows faced a still bright east, but twilight had obviously come early to its luxurious environs, now that the sun was sinking into the west.

It took a moment for Holroyd to realize that he was slumped low in his chair; and that the goddess was regarding him from over the table with a faint, amused smile on her lips.

Her eyes, however, were serene. She looked at ease, comfortable, pleased with herself. Before Holroyd could speak, she said:

"I showed you the far side of Nushirvan, adjoining Accadistran because I believe knowing about them will help you in planning your attack."

Holroyd couldn't quite see how. He parted his lips to say so, then shut them again.

He who knew nothing about past discussions between Ineznio and the goddess couldn't even think of asking questions.

Except that he *had* already asked one. And she had answered, unsatisfactorily to be sure, but answered.

Holroyd said: "That river of boiling mud—why couldn't we cross it?"

The woman shook her head; the movement caused her hair to catch a flash of light. There was a fascinating glint of gold, like a fire stirred into life.

Her voice came softly, out of the thickening gloom:

"There are some things, Ineznio, that even you must not ask questions about. limitations to certain of my powers."

She was standing up. She came around the table and her arms were warm against his neck and cheek as she bent down.

Her lips were cool at first, then demanding. After a moment the hard questions that still quivered in Holroyd's mind began to fade.

"Later," he thought shakily, "he would think this whole business through completely—"

Holroyd picked up the pen and wrote:

"The greatest power in Gonwonlane is the Goddess Ineznia. She brought Ptath here before he was due. How this was done was shown to me."

He stared at the paragraph with satisfaction. Just seeing it written down made him feel better. All day yesterday he had been rushed almost beyond his mental ability to keep up.

Already the new morning had slowed the tempo of his life. Here he was sitting at a writing desk alone, thinking over his problems in a leisurely fashion.

The resulting general picture seemed

distinctly clearer. L'onee had been sent against her will to bring him back to Gonwonlane, and she had done so.

That was the beginning. By writing down everything in sequence, he ought to be able to fit in some of the pieces now missing, and draw decisive and important conclusions.

Holroyd poised his pen, then wrote again:

"The second greatest power in Gonwonlane, but one greatly circumscribed, is L'onee. She frustrated the attempt of the Goddess Ineznia to snatch Ptath into the palace. How this frustration was accomplished was shown to me, and—"

Holroyd stopped. He raised the pen and stared at the sentence blankly. It was untrue. He *hadn't* been shown. He had been told. He—

After a moment of shocked meditation he whistled softly. Very swiftly, then, he began to write.

In half an hour there was no more doubt. He scribbled his conclusions:

"The woman I thought L'onee is, of course, Ineznia. Accordingly, everything told to me by the temple princess, by Moora, the peasant girl, and by Marshal Nand's wife, is a distorted version, if not the exact reverse of the truth.

"The gaunt woman who tried to kill me, who gave me the ring, and who found speech so difficult, must be the real L'onee."

Holroyd leaned back and stared at the written words. He could almost feel the shock mounting inside him, with wonder and a thousand questions flooding hard after, a totality that narrowed down to one dark surge of amazement:

Why, *why* had she done everything as she had?

There was only one answer to that, finally. Under no circumstances would Ineznia have willingly given him a single clue. Obviously, then, she had done it all because she had to.

Ptath in making his preparations for merging with the race hadn't been an absolute fool. He had left protectives.

Gloomily, Holroyd enumerated them one by one on a sheet of paper.

"First: Evocation of a previous personality, presumably intelligent. The personality turned out to be Peter Holroyd." He paused, then added: "It seems hardly possible that Ptath could have desired such a confusing evocation. But call it the first protective.

"Second: The realm of darkness *had* to be shown. Third: A prayer stick in action. Fourth: A journey of minds, with its curious revelation that the goddess cannot penetrate Nushirvan beyond the river of boiling mud, which river completely surrounds the most thickly populated part of the outlaw state, like a moat. Fifth—"

Holroyd paused over the fifth. The how of it was more obscure. But there was no mistaking that Ineznia had regarded it as of vital importance. In the little cottage she had tried to get him to make love to the peasant girl, Moora; then—

Holroyd frowned, but finally it seemed to him that he had it, not clear, but understandable.

Sex was the great basic. In a world where a curious and terrible discovery had been made that, when men worshiped a woman in a certain rigid ceremonial—or woman a man—the woman became a goddess in actuality as well as name, and the man a god—in such a world sex must have an intimate relation to the vastly greater organic force that was enslaving a nation of fifty-four billion souls.

Man's terrible penchant to render homage to heroes, kings and nonexistent gods had at last created divinity.

"The sixth protective," Holroyd wrote, "must relate in some fashion to that page of people to be executed. She would never have insisted on my signature if it was not connected."

He scowled pensively. The shock came suddenly, a lightning bolt of com-

prehension. Like a madman he leaped to his feet and raced into the great living room.

The book was still there on the table. He snatched it and rippled toward the L's. He found the torn segment. The last name immediately before the page that had been torn out was Lin'ra; the name at the top of the sheet immediately following the missing page was Lotibar.

There was no doubt at all. He had signed L'onee's death warrant.

The thunder faded slowly from his mind. He stood grim and dismayed, assessing the extent of his ruin, and—what was more important—the hope that remained.

Thank God, he thought starkly, that his resistance had forced Ineznia to post date the sentences six months.

Slowly, realization came that there were other hopes. He hadn't sat in the god chair; and there must be something in connection with the river of boiling mud that was not yet in favor of Ineznia.

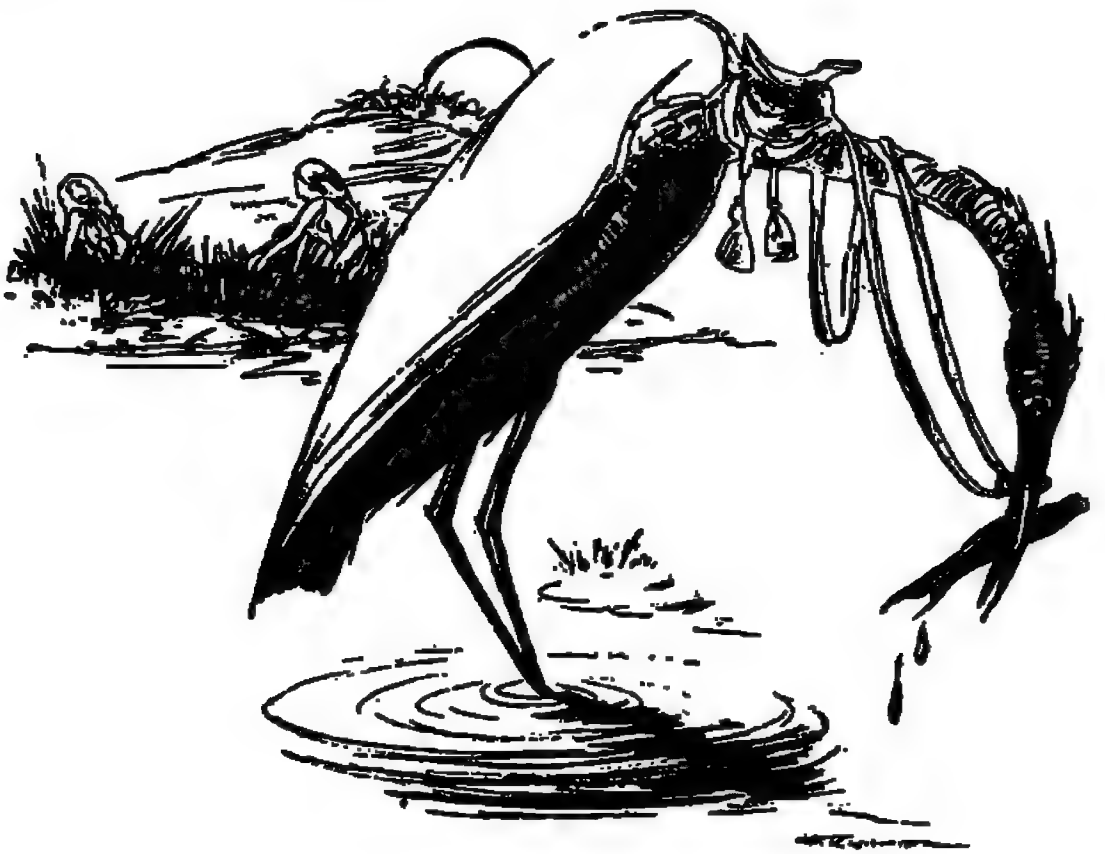
And what about the attack on Nushirvan?

A knock on one of the doors stirred the developing blankness of his mind. The knocker was a woman guard, who said:

"Marshal Gara sends his compliments and wishes you to be informed that the general staff is ready to leave for the Nushirvan front."

Holroyd rattled off a speech he had prepared much earlier, one designed to get him to the starting point without the confusion of a search through a labyrinth of strange corridors. He said drably:

"Provide an escort for me to the place of departure. I shall be out in a moment."



He returned hastily to the writing room, tore to shreds the papers on which he had written his analysis, and then stood striving to shake thought into his head.

Slowly, his mind grew colder, harder. He walked over to the cabinet beside the desk, took out the ring that had so briefly thwarted Ineznia's purpose, slipped it on—then strode into the living room, and picked up the great ledger with its list of rebels.

The book should come in handy.

Deadlier grew his determination. The conviction came: The old Ptath couldn't have been such a fool as not to set traps for plotters.

Accordingly—carry on until further reflections yielded a better plan; attack Nushirvan; capture the so-called god chair and, not necessarily sit in it, but even do that if nothing else suggested itself.

Time was short, and caution never won a battle. Besides, what else was there to do?

Carry on!

XIV.

The brook burbled and swished. In the grass beside it, L'onee sat combing her hair. She had taken off her clothes and the long, gaunt shape of the once dead body glinted brown and white in the sun.

L'onee paused now, and leaned over the edge of the water to peer at her image. And smiled not altogether displeased.

The body she had assumed, after a week of careful exposure to the warming rays of the sun, was beginning to show a life of its own. The hair, so lavishly combed, gleamed up at her with a dark luster. The green eyes had lost their fixed stare; the water reflected them as if two emeralds were there glowing in a soft light. The face—.

L'onee sighed. She had done her best with the face but it hadn't been enough. There it was, high cheekboned and long, and very plain.

She was still staring at it when, abruptly, she felt the approaching *presence*. She looked up. There was a flash of blue above the water ten feet away, a spinning shape of light and color and shade that came out of nothingness and took the living form of the Goddess Ineznia.

The small, glistening, naked body seemed to poise for a moment, and then as it emerged all the way into materialization, it half fell, half leaped into the water.

Without haste Ineznia paddled out of the shallow pool. As L'onee stared curiously, Ineznia climbed onto the bank, and seated herself in the grass two yards distant.

Ineznia said scornfully: "You think you were very clever, don't you, giving him the ring with power."

L'onee shrugged. She half decided to answer. Then changed her mind as memory came that most of Ineznia's statements were rhetorical and not meant to evoke answers.

She studied the serene face of the other. There was something in the very unruffled expression that told of triumph. L'onee said softly:

"So he has signed my death warrant. But it can't be for right away. I would have known the moment you materialized. How long have I to live, Ineznia, darling?"

The serenity of the goddess' face broke before a ripple of exultant laughter.

"You do not think I will tell you that, do you?"

"Then," said L'onee tranquilly, "I shall carry on as if it's never."

It was a tiny victory to watch the frown of displeasure creep over Ineznia's delicate face. Then the rich voice snapped:

"Your true body at least I can destroy at will."

Sense of victory faded. L'onee gasped: "You mean, you haven't destroyed it yet? You—"

She forced herself to stop. She was trembling, abruptly cold. Her true body!—it was silly even to think about it now that she had so deliberately left it behind, but—

She couldn't help it. Believing it already destroyed, she had thought all the doubt resolved by a grim reality. But now—

Everything that her body represented, the great beauty that had attracted and held mighty Ptath, the fact that it was a pole of god power—it was all still there for her to snatch if she could strike fast enough.

With an effort she cut the ruinous trend of thought, said huskily:

"You're even more clever than I believed, Ineznia. But not clever enough. I live or die with Ptath."

"It will be death—and soon," said the other coolly. "Five spells of the seven are canceled forever. His suspicion has now been aroused, I think, but it no longer matters. My net has snared him; and even spell number six well on the way to dissolution. For it I have prepared a superb little plan that will utterly nullify any independent thinking he may be doing.

"The new plan—really very old because it has been in my mind for a long time—will strike him down within a day or so.

"I thought," Ineznia finished placidly, "that I would put an end to any little hope you might have built up on the basis of your regained power and freedom."

There was nothing to say to that. L'onee sat weary, wanly aware that the tête-à-tête was going the way of most interviews in which Ineznia participated: The way of defeat.

She let the silence gather; and after a little she felt better. Because, actually, her defeat wasn't as great as it seemed.

For a week she had waited for Ineznia to come, deliberately keeping near water so that the coming would be easy. For a week she had wondered what was happening, and now she would find out.

Curious the vainglory in the golden goddess' character. Her own life as captive would have been unbearable had it not been for Ineznia's frequent visits, Ineznia's eagerness to relate her exploits and her victories.

L'onee said quietly: "Frankly, I don't believe that he can organize a successful invasion of those volcanic mountains. After all, you tried seven times, and seven times the army failed to reach the chair of Ptath."

Ineznia made an impatient gesture and began to speak. Her voice formed a pattern of sound against the quietness of that remote valley.

At first L'onee listened to the sound, only vaguely aware of the sense. There was something, something, in the

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other's tone, a curious note of accomplishment as if this recital was about an event that had already had its culmination, about a triumph already scored.

The conviction grew, and it was suddenly devastating to be sitting here listening to this incredible creature, knowing that she was being played with. In one or two days, Ineznia had said, her plan would work out. The truth must be, one or two days *ago*. Or perhaps it was happening now, this very hour, while she sat talking. What was she saying:

". . . He gave a lecture on the second day of his arrival at the front to ten thousand marshals and their wives. I was one of the wives—it was almost strange how everything he said coincided with my own recent thinking on military strategy, the importance of increasing out of all present proportion the number of freight-carrying screers and grimbs. It was very interesting, particularly because—"

Ineznia paused. She smiled. Then she said in a sugary voice:

"Only you, my darling L'onee, know about *that*. And your tongue is sealed, is it not, sweet? But you will know what I mean when I tell you that the key word is Accadistran."

L'onee said in a steely rage: "You devil! You incredible murderess! You plan—"

Elfin laughter shimmering in a sonal harmony cut across her words. The laughter ended in the abrupt fashion that left no doubt at all of the utter humorlessness of the mind and soul behind it. Ineznia said coldly:

"How sentimental we are. What can it possibly matter if a human being dies a few years before his time."

She lay back on the grass with a tantalizing air of having endless time to spend. Her perfect body gleamed white in the blaze of the morning sun. But her eyes were like blue marble as she stared along the brook and the valley, where it spread toward the northern hills.

For a long minute she seemed lost in bleak contemplation of L'onee's screer, which stood like some great fisher bird, its long-beaked head darting again and again into the stream, emerging each time with a white-bellied fish.

It seemed to L'onee that she could almost read the thought behind Ineznia's stare. But it was obvious, finally, that the golden goddess knew better than to attempt to break an established animal control. Ineznia sighed and said:

"Too bad Ptath delivered his lecture so soon instead of waiting till after he had appointed rebel officers to high commands. I feel sure his earnest manner, his immense confidence, and the substance of his words would have dissipated even their suspicion.

"I must admit I was surprised myself at the bold manner in which he has taken command of such a vast army." She looked up thoughtfully, said: "I doubt if the man Holroyd realizes that only a demi-Ptath could have grasped such power as he has already taken, but, of course, it doesn't matter now that the rebels have fallen for a little trick of mine."

She paused, smiling with such glee that L'onee stared at her. In spite of her own previous analysis that there was a triumph here already completed, or in the process of completion, L'onee had the blank sense of an exultation utterly out of place.

"Trick?" she echoed.

The rich voice, aglow now, went on: "Yesterday, he led rebel officers and artists, mounted on screers, on an aerial reconnaissance. This morning he has taken another group, mounted on grimbs, to survey the same area on the basis of the sketches drawn yesterday."

"But I don't see—" L'onee began emptily.

"You will, my dear," the goddess spoke caressingly, "when I tell you that two days ago I allowed to fall into the

hands of the rebel General—now Marshal—Maarik, a document purporting to be from Ineznio to me, in which the entire invasion was shown to be a trick designed to destroy the rebels."

She stood up lazily, her hair flashing fire-gold in the sun from the movement. "The rebels," she said, "are taking action on that this morning. As a result, *my* design—to break the sixth spell—will be accomplished today. By tonight the god chair will be in my control."

Her smile shone at L'onee. "The reason I acted with such dispatch, you will be happy to know, is because your escape, with the power I had to give you, provided an unexpected obstacle, with which I am taking no chances, none whatever. Good-by, darling."

She stepped into the water—and vanished.

For a long moment L'onee stared bitterly at the spot where Ineznia had disappeared. So the one week she had allowed herself, the week that would give this half-dead body time to come further into life—that week had proved too long.

She began slowly to dress. It was difficult to know what she should have done. She had counted on the attack against Nushirvan requiring time to mount. Now, her own dim plan, with its emphasis on helping Ptath to learn the full, terrible truth of what he faced—that limited plan must be speeded up, adjusted somehow to the new situation.

Her immediate objective was utterly obvious. She must find Ptath. Wherever he was, she must seek him out. His headquarters would be in the central hills, opposite the city Three of Nushirvan. Somewhere in that enormous spread of valleys and ever steeper hills, with its confusing totality of men and beasts, would be Ptath—in trouble.

She finished buckling her sandals, forced the screer to come to her; and a minute later was flying to the northwest.

XV.

"Outlaws!" Holroyd heard someone say.

"Eh?" He spoke sharply. He stiffened slowly in his saddle on the back of the grimb. Startled, he stared at the long line of riders coming across the green valley.

His eyes narrowed. Outlaws here *behind* the army encampments, after all the precautions he had taken. Beside him a man's voice said softly:

"About five hundred. That's two to one. How does it feel, great lord Ineznio, to be facing the peril yourself instead of being so cool and self-possessed about the depredations of the Nushirvan outlaws that you agreed to a fake invasion."

Holroyd sent the speaker a shocked look. The man was small, dressed in the uniform of a colonel, but there was an insolence in his manner, an air of assured command, that marked him as a person far more important in some other organization.

Holroyd sighed. Funny, how he had been so set on his own plans that the possibility of suspicion on the part of the people whose cause he was particularly upholding had never entered his mind.

So the rebels had somehow found out about the goddess' original seeming intention to make a false attack; and with a grim humor they had made an arrangement with the outlaws to capture the man they thought was Prince Ineznio.

Sitting there, his dismay must have surged into his face, because the thick-cheeked young colonel laughed loudly, then said in a steely voice:

"You've been here a week, and you haven't fooled anybody with your sudden appointing to command positions of men who have long favored an attack on Nushirvan.

"The important thing about that trick is that they now *have* the commands; the general orders are known

to all high officers. To fool those not in on our plan, we have forged some beautiful letters stating that you are going on a recruiting tour.

"The attack *will* take place, but it won't be any half measure. One month from today the army moves."

The first shock was over. Holroyd sat quiet, grimmer now. He sent a quick glance at the approaching line of outlaws. They seemed to be in no hurry, sure of their prey. They were still half a mile away.

The gap of distance brought no comfort. There was no illusion in him. The god Ptath, with his present strength, could not handle this situation.

And yet he must not be captured.

It would ruin everything. Didn't these fools realize that the Gonwonlanian army wasn't ready for any attack on such an incredible mountain fortress as Nushirvan?

There must be three, four, five months of regrouping, at least. And there must be night and day accumulation of supplies. On top of that it was absolutely vital that a screer and grimb transport service be organized to include at least two out of every three birds and beasts on the entire vast continent.

Blitz and a flexible transport system —that was the answer to the appalling mountains, the glaring volcanoes, the bubbling black quicksands that formed the enormous, uneasy isthmus of Nushirvan.

Curt laughter welled up inside him. Who among that great concourse of officers would know what to do with a hundred million animals and birds?

Beside Holroyd, the colonel said: "It's foolish even to think of resisting. Look behind you. There's five hundred more. You can't escape this ambush."

Holroyd did not turn. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen a movement on the lip of the steep hill that formed the right flank of this green gem of a valley. Riders! They charged over the rim and raced down the rough slopes.

It was recklessly, superbly done; and Holroyd felt a chill glow of admiration. A quick glance over his left shoulder showed that the other flank of the valley was disgorging riders from a narrow ravine.

The ring was complete, with no military brilliance involved, simply a pure dependence on overwhelming force.

Unhurriedly, now that it was clear that the incidence of the outlaws presence must run its course, Holroyd reexamined his personal position. And after a moment realized that two hopes existed. The first—

He urged his grimb forward toward a slender man who sat tall on his mount at the head of the line of grimbs. The officer saw him coming and watched his approach with a grave smile that actually ended the first hope then and there. But Holroyd did not pause. He rode up; he said curtly:

"Marshal Uubrig, you will order the men to scatter in all directions with the purpose of confusing the enemy, the possibility that some will escape."

He saw that the other was looking at him curiously. "Will I, sir?" the officer drawled finally.

He went on in a gentle tone: "I think it would be rather difficult to persuade the men. It's a special group, you know. Every one here has lost sister or brother, mother or father to the outlaws. They realize that the Nushirvan are untrustworthy. They are convinced they are sacrificing themselves, but believe that your capture makes it worth while.

"Do you think, my great Prince Inezmio," Marshal Uubrig finished ironically, "that men of such mind would rush to obey my orders if I should suddenly command them as you directed?"

Holroyd was silent. In spite of the fact that he had not counted on these picked officers trying to scatter out of the trap, this calm statement of their reason for not doing so shocked, then pulled him, staggering mentally, out of

his concentration on himself and his desires.

Incredibly, he was once more proven utterly remiss. Just as he had failed to take the rebels into his calculations, so had he completely neglected to consider the outlaws.

Almost blankly, Holroyd went over in his mind his past attitude toward Nushirvan.

There wasn't any. He hadn't really thought of it from their point of view. They had been blurs, much like the Germans after his first emotional hatred of their collective actions yielded to the hard, bitter reality of fighting.

Attack Nushirvan, L'once had said; and the appalling trickery of the goddess, her abnormal attempts to avoid such an attack, had intensified his own convictions that the invasion must be launched.

Now, of course, it seemed that her actions had been merely a greater trick

to get him to make the attack. But that was beside the point. That was something to be thought out on its own merits.

The future speculation drained; he saw that the nearest of the riders was only two or three hundred yards away. He'd have to hurry and find someone who would co-operate in carrying out his second hope.

He whirled his mount, parted his lips to yell his request, and then closed them again in a flare of hesitation.

It was one thing, he thought, to remember what Ptath had gone through physically; it was another entirely to force himself deliberately to—

The riders were a hundred yards away.

"Is there any man here," Holroyd shouted, "who will put an arrow through my heart?"

In spite of urgency, the sound of his own words chilled and startled him. With an effort he pushed on:

"Hurry!" he cried.

No one answered. No one moved; the brilliantly garbed officers glanced at each other, and then glanced uneasily at the charging outlaws.

"You see"—it was the colonel, come up beside him—"we promised to deliver you alive. Our only hope that they will let us go is that we do deliver you—alive!"

Holroyd had no sense of desperation now. He felt cool, collected, determined. He *had* to escape this ridiculous kidnaping. Out there at headquarters he had free will, a chance to think things over. Here, once more, was that deadly pressure of too much happening too swiftly, which had already brought him to the verge of ruin.

He saw that the colonel carried one of those beautifully slender hardwood, stone-tipped lances that officers sported.

Before the man was even aware of his intention, Holroyd had urged his grimb over. There was the briefest fight over the possession of the weapon. The officer's eyes widened as the lance was torn from his grip as if he were a small child.

Then Holroyd was twisting away triumphantly. He whipped the spear around and, because there wasn't an instant to waste, plunged the weapon into his left breast, hard and deep.

He was only vaguely aware of the churning arrival of more than fifteen hundred outlaws.

The pain was hideous for a moment.

The agony faded. Holroyd could still feel the pressing of the lance against his body where it had entered. It was an unpleasantly heavy weight that he would have to get rid of as soon as he possibly could.

Holroyd let himself slump slowly backward onto the broad, smooth hide of the beast he rode, taking care to keep his feet in the leather stirrups. Nearby somebody bellowed in a guttural rage, but the language was Gonwonlanian.

"So this is the way you deliver the body. The Nushir will make somebody pay for this. Round them all up, the dirty traitors."

A voice—the colonel's—protested. "It was not our fault. You saw yourself how he grabbed my lance and killed himself. Who'd ever expect pleasure-loving Ineznio to do that?"

Holroyd felt a bleak sympathy for the man. These rebels were right, basically; in all the universe no group was being, or ever had been, braver, defying an unkillable woman and a religio-slave set-up of temple potentates more powerful than anything that had ever existed anywhere.

And each man here had taken his part in this dangerous rendezvous with the outlaws, knowing that he might never return alive.

"Dead or not, I've got to deliver his body!" the outlaw leader's voice roared. "Now, get a move on, all of you. We can't waste any time here."

There was a heavy stamping of claw-armored paws; and then movement that became a flowing run.

After ten minutes, Holroyd thought bitterly: They could at least have removed the lance from his body.

The weapon began to worry him. It seemed incredible that he could go on all day with such a solid shaft pushed squarely into his breast.

The organic structure of the Ptath body must be absolutely *radical*.

After another five minutes that ceased to be even remotely encouraging. Cautiously, Holroyd slitted his eyes and lay for a moment blinking at a sun that was still far from mid-heaven.

In flinging himself backward as he had he had put himself into an awkward position. He let his head roll sideways, but there was still more sky than ground in his range of vision.

Far away he could suddenly see a big screer, with a single rider, flapping northward. Holroyd thought in anguish: "If only the fool on the bird's back would realize what was happening. There was still time to send a warning that would cut off this venturesome crew of outlaws from the Nushirvan border."

But as he watched gloomily, the bird vanished into the mists over a hill.

Conscious again of the lance, Holroyd allowed himself to tilt forward, slowly, as a dead man might under the capricious pressure of movement.

It took the most careful manipulation, but, finally, watching every instant from his almost closed eyes, he succeeded in establishing a solid base for the shaft end of the lance at the lower end of the grimb's neck.

He began to press forward. There was a flash of pain as the lance pierced out of his back. But he clamped his teeth and pushed harder.

It took time to push it through. There were new bases to be established for bracing the shortening shaft. Finally, however, he lay flat forward on the back of the grimb and he could feel the unsteady pressure of the lance as it wavered above him like a flagless flagpole in a rushing wind.

From the corner of his eyes, Holroyd studied his situation. There was an outlaw riding on either side of him, the one on the left almost directly opposite. If he could roll over—

He did. Instantly, a bass voice grounted in pain and then cursed.

"Oh, shut up!" a nearby voice commanded. "Tear that lance out of him. It's unbalancing the corpse. I noticed it was working its way through."

The sense of weight ended. Holroyd lay quiet; he had a heady conviction of victory. "Tonight," he thought savagely, "tonight under cover of darkness and volcanic mists who would watch a dead body?"

There was a yell from the bass voice, then shouted words:

"Hey, look, chief. There's no blood on this spear. Something's wrong."

There was indeed. In a minute Holroyd's grimb halted; rough hands caught him, pulled him to the ground, fumbled over him. Then the leader's voice, hard with satisfaction:

"No wounds. I thought it funny the goddess' lover should be so mortal. Better snap out of it, Prince Ineznio."

Without a word, Holroyd climbed to his feet and mounted his grimb.

Almost to a man the outlaws were big, tall men. Many were bearded or mustached. From such a rough-and-ready crew, Holroyd expected ridiculing laughter. But there was nothing like that. Men looked at him and when he returned their stare they wouldn't face it, but glanced away hastily.

The rebels acted the same way, which was worrying. Because it was important that he make friends with somebody.

The general reaction seemed unnatural until he tried to picture what they had seen; a man with a lance through his heart rising unharmed, unhurt.

On and on pounded the long columns, winding through ever wilder foothills.

Noon brought no pause. A small,

wooden basket of food was handed to Holroyd by one of the outlaws, but the other prisoners, Holroyd noted narrowly, received nothing.

He examined his basket with interest. It contained three types of fruit, one of which he had not seen before. It was round and about three inches in diameter. It had a thick, soft, red skin that peeled like a banana, and tasted like a grape.

The parcel contained no bread, or other baked foods, just the fruit.

The seesaw of movement had brought a rebel officer opposite him. To him, Holroyd said:

"If you will promise to eat what I have here, you can have it. In a crisis, I can do without food for"—he paused, smiled with grim memory; finished—"for seven hundred years."

The officer said curtly: "Go to Accadistran!"

Holroyd knew better than to let the subject drop. Food was food, more precious to a hungry man than ideals.

The long afternoon waned, and still he made no effort to touch the fruit. The partly peeled grape was turning a rusty color when once more his own beast and that of the other officer—a General Seyteil; Holroyd recalled the name vaguely—matched strides.

"General," Holroyd said earnestly, "have you any idea how far we are from the river of boiling mud?"

The officer, a lean, hawk-nosed man of forty, hesitated, then shrugged:

"We should reach it well before dark," he said. "There are about a dozen bridge approaches to the city Three, which lies about eight kanbs beyond the river."

Holroyd nodded but he felt an ugly chill. He mustn't cross that river, not until he had thought over what Ineznia's inability to cross even mentally, meant.

He hadn't thought it was quite so close.

In dark speculation, Holroyd studied the profile of the rebel officer, but there was a granite quality there that promised nothing, in spite of the fact that the man had already answered one of his questions.

The officer and the steely resolve that had brought him into such grave danger constituted a fort that it would take time and effort to overcome.

And time was the one thing that was lacking.

Moodily, Holroyd stared at the hills. Higher they were now than when the journey had started. And in the near distance ahead still others spired and turreted, domed and minareted to ever new heights, and already some shed smoke into a sky that was growing ever hazier.

He could almost feel the world of mist that was Nushirvan, closing, closing around him. He turned again to the officer.

"This food," he said urgently above the raging of heavy paws, "I swear it is not my intention to eat it. If you don't want it, pass it on to somebody who doesn't know it comes from me. Food knows nothing of hate or ideology."

The man took the basket without a word, ate the huge grape, and handed the container to another rebel. Holroyd did not bother to trace the food further. He said:

"Suppose I were to swear that I came to the Nushirvan front to fight and conquer, would that make any difference in the attitude of yourself and the others?"

"None at all," was the cool answer. "Prince Ineznio is a puppet of the goddess. We know exactly what she is."

"Suppose," said Holroyd grimly, "I told you I was not Ineznio? That I was —Ptath."

The man turned and stared at him. His eyes were appraising. Finally, he laughed.

"That's clever. There's only one thing wrong. No one can convince us that such a person as Ptath ever existed, and—"

He broke off, finished coolly: "I seem to have underestimated our speed.

There's the river of boiling mud just ahead. We should be in the city Three by evening."

It was as swift as that. Approaching the stone bridge that spanned the river of mud, the grimbs broke step. Holroyd had a brief glimpse of bubbling mud and there was a sense of heat, countless flashes of steam.

In half an hour they were all across. Deeper and deeper into the land of Nushirvan they raced.

XVI.

As the bridge receded behind the long caravan, Holroyd grew conscious of exhilaration—like a man, he thought grimly, on his way to the execution chamber.

But the dark comparison wouldn't stay in his mind. It didn't fit. He felt amazingly alive, a tingling sense of being in the midst of great events, an immense, wondering conviction. . .

Could mortal man desire more than this: to be two hundred million years in the future, a demigod in a fantastic land?

Ptath! Mighty Ptath! If only he could snatch the great power that was here, he'd crush the damnable temple civilization and—"

The thought flagged. Awareness came of the intensity of his feelings, an intensity that had not existed before the crossing of the bridge.

Holroyd sat very still on the broad back of the grimb, letting his mind relax, his whole being grow quiet. He waited, watching for some inward sign that would indicate new and terrible personal strength.

After a moment there was still only the flowing movement of the monster he rode.

Holroyd shook himself in sudden fury. Damn it, there must be a difference. He *felt* different, more alert, eager rather than depressed.

His angry gaze fell on the ring that had so startled Ineznia. A thought struck him, memory of childhood fairy tales. With a wry smile he caught the ring, twisted it three times, said:

"By this ring I demand to be transported instantly to my headquarters in Gonwonlane."

His smile deepened as the seconds fled, and nothing happened. He tried again, anger evaporated now. But there was still nothing.

He had known, of course. God power was not just hocus-pocus. It grew out of one of the deepest, most sustained of human emotional complexes.

Old, old was that impulse, that mass urge to devotion and obedience. And, somewhere, long ago, a king named Ptath had been lifted up to the status of genuine godhood that had been potential from the first moment that a primitive vassal prostrated himself abjectly at the broad, naked feet of the first chieftain-priest.

And, of course, once so cataclysmic a force was discovered, other men of steel would learn about it, recognize its nondivine origin, and strive with unutterable ambition to participate in the glory that issued naturally to the fortunate controller.

Once discovered, the great power could only be transferred; it could never be destroyed. Always a new god ruler would replace the fallen one.

Such *forces* would never again vanish from the affairs of men. Even Ptath had believed that he was assuring his ultimate reassumption of the shining mantle, ere he laid it aside to sink into his incomprehensible merging with the race.

Why had Ptath done such a foolish thing in the first place?

The answer could easily have a tremendous bearing on events now proceeding. Had Ptath, perhaps, believed the action a key to greater power?

But no answer came to Holroyd. His mind might as well have remained blank; the questions raged through, and all that mattered in the end was the

tireless flowing run of the grimb. On and on raced the powerful convoy of prisoners and captors, pushing higher and higher into the ever higher foothills.

Holroyd saw his first castle. It was a dark stone structure that squatted like an enormous cone-hatted witch in the center of a spread of houses on top of a fortified hill.

The sight brought a thrill, then a savage eagerness, consciousness of the military tactics that must be used against such a formidable obstacle in a world that lacked seige artillery.

Screer-mounted troops flung down in masses that would saturate the defenses of each fort in turn. Carried out with sufficient blitz violence, casualties should be extremely light.

Such forces could safely attack three days ahead of the ground forces and

paralyze the communications of the enemy.

Apparently, in the seven attacks mentioned by the history books, nothing like that had ever been tried.

Thank God, he had outlined the plan to some high marshals.

On and on went that stream of speculation. The shadows in the valleys lengthened. The sun glowed blood-red as it sank toward a smoking volcano in the western hills.

There were carts now, pulled by dottles, on a smaller side road, a steady stream of them coming from behind a hill that loomed ahead. They turned off into scores of side roads that led toward forts and buildings that stood now on every hilltop.

The head of the long column started to round the hill. Suddenly, a great shout echoed from them. The cry was taken up, and swept down the line in a gathering crescendo:

"The Nushir! The Nushir's standard flies from the central fort. The Nushir has come in person to interview the Prince Ineznio—"

A minute later, Holroyd's own grimb rounded the hill; and he saw—

The city Three spread before and above the caravan. Holroyd stared with a gathering fascination.

What the Nushiryan called the great collection of buildings was a mystery that had been lost in the ages. There was a vague story—he had been told by an officer a few days before—that its name was Yit or Yip or Yik. But on all the Gonwonlane military maps Holroyd had examined it was known simply as Three.

Which meant that only two other outlaw cities were closer to the border. And one of these was far to the west, the other equally far to the east.

Three stood on an enormous plateau and climbed the hills to the rear; and in the dusk it was like a city out of the legends of Am, dark, curiously unwholesome, a strange nebulous dream out of antiquity.

The wind which brought the subdued rumble of the city to Holroyd wafted also odd odors, a not unpleasant intermingling of kitchen smells with the scent of grimb stables and screer aeries.

All-pervading was that perfume; and as the long line of riders padded swiftly along the dimming streets it became the air they breathed, thick, normal, almost rich. and—Holroyd smiled grimly—probably quite healthy.

"Prince," said the voice of General Seyteil.

Holroyd turned. Before he could verbally acknowledge the call, the hawk-nosed officer went on, swiftly:

"I've been thinking of what you said back here!" The general made a vague movement with his head. "If you're Ptath, why haven't you asserted your power?"

Holroyd made no immediate answer. He was thinking, shocked, of how completely he had forgotten his attempt to win over this man. Forgotten it the instant the river of boiling mud was crossed, and his purpose—to secure help to prevent a crossing—was frustrated by the event.

His attention concentrated slowly on the general, and consciousness came that his delay in answering might look like stalling for time.

Quickly, he explained his hesitation, then his situation. The general cut him off in a violent astonishment:

"You mean when you crossed that moat of mud you smashed a spell that had kept the goddess out of Nushirvan? But how—"

"I don't understand how it worked," Holroyd said with a quiet earnestness. "I've been trying to think of it as something planted in her mind, which she couldn't nullify, in spite of all the power she's accumulated."

It was darker now, harder to see the other man. The streets were lighted by dull light sticks that sent a dim glow through the mist of darkness and fog

that was thickening over the city.

A coolness came down from the hills; comfortable it was, after the blazing heat of the day, but the intensity of the night that was falling only emphasized how near was the end of the journey and the parting of the ways that would come with it. Holroyd went on hurriedly:

"What made you speak to me in the first place?"

There was no answer; and after a moment Holroyd shrugged. He rode for a while, grim, then he said:

"I presume most of you are sent on to Accadistran. What does the Zard do with kidnaped people?"

This time there was satiric laughter out of the darkness. Then the general said:

"The report is the Zard wants colonists. But since no prisoners have ever escaped from such a colony, we suspect the worst. There are incredible stories— As for why I called to you, it seemed to me your claim to be Ptath might be of benefit to us whether or not you actually are Ptath. Your story about the rebel Tar at the temple Linn could be verified, you know."

The officer finished in an odd, disconnected fashion: "As I say I was thinking of that, and then I remembered our position. And realized that we're subject to"—he laughed softly—"change without notice. Oh! We're slowing."

It was so. Deceleration was as smooth and jerkless as had been the entire journey. The great beasts cut their pace naturally, by the simple process of ceasing their forward pressure. Momentum carried them on with an easy, graceful motion.

They poured between two lighted posterns; and for a long moment after they had come to a stop it was hard to realize that dynamic action had merged so naturally into utter passivity.

Men surrounded Holroyd.

"This way, Prince Ineznio. You are to be taken at once to the noble Nushir."

He was led along a great marble corridor that opened into a vast room at the far end of which sat a man and two women.

The Nushir of Nushirvan was a big, plump, blue-eyed young man. The throne chairs of his wives were set partly behind his large one, but both were to his right.

As Holroyd stepped into the room, the two women automatically leaned toward each other, whispered simultaneously; and then nodded in unison.

One was slender and dark, one was plump and fair, and their action was so much as if they had thought the same thought, and spoke it, all in a spirit of perfect agreement, that Holroyd's attention was caught to them.

It cost him a distinct effort to disengage his mind and concentrate on the fact that the Nushir was speaking. He was dimly aware that the guards had withdrawn beyond closed doors.

The plump man said in a soft voice: "You are truly Ineznio?"

There was a curious, obscene eagerness in the creature. He leaned forward. His eyes glistened with an off-color, blue avidity that made Holroyd wary as he nodded his reply.

The steely thought came to him: There was no doubt at all that the hereditary outlaw chieftain had had a purpose in making a deal with the rebels for Ineznio's capture. Holroyd waited tensely as the man said:

"And you are in charge of the attack that is being mounted against my country."

Comprehension struck along every nerve of Holroyd's body. He stared at his too plump interrogator with narrowed eyes, abruptly fascinated by the personal potentialities of the situation.

Why, if he handled this right, he could be free in ten minutes.

He stood letting the whole picture, the full weight of the idea sink in. And every quiver of the man's palpitating anxiety was suddenly understandable and it fitted.

The dull-blue eyes shone with an unlovely ardor, the big plump hands opened and closed as if they were grasping, reaching, toward an intensely desired object; the thick lips hung agape, and the soft heavy nose dilated. The entire physical appearance of the ruler showed the truth:

The Nushir of Nushirvan had learned that he was about to be attacked. And, in spite of the failure of past invasions, he was alarmed at this new threat.

Holroyd drew a deep breath, said: "If your defensive precautions are at all normal, you won't have to worry."

"What do you mean?"

"The attack," said Holroyd coolly, "is being made to satisfy dissonant elements. There is no intention of forcing it to a conclusion. By having me captured, you have played into the hands of the very people who want to destroy you."

"He's lying." It was the dark-haired woman, her voice thin and harsh. She tugged at the fat young arm of her master. "He hesitated too long before answering, and besides there is something in his manner. Put him to the torture instantly. We must know."

"Ah," said Holroyd, "I see the government in Nushirvan is the same as in Gonwonlane."

The odd blue eyes studied him bleakly. There was uncertainty in them and curiosity. Finally, the Nushir said:

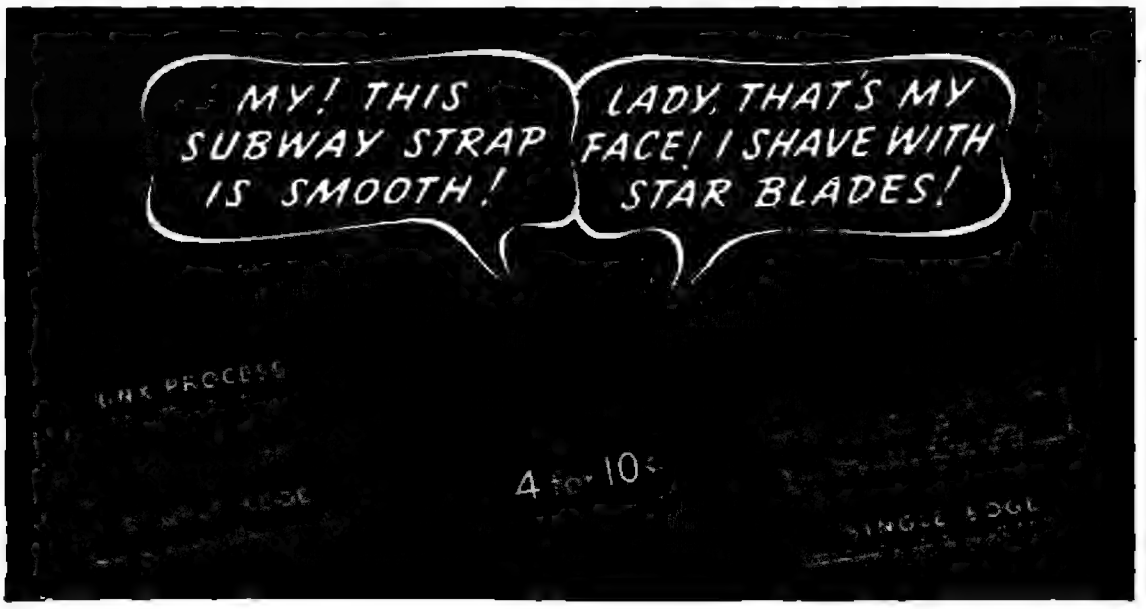
"Explain that."

"Both are run by women," said Holroyd coolly; and the two women gasped. In their automatic fashion, they bent toward each other, but each must have drawn a blank response, for they straightened and sat looking baffled.

The Nushir merely sat sluggish, more impassive, but he wiggled his head with the faintest impatience, as the dark woman tugged again at his arm. She did not seem to be aware of her master's mood, for she spoke, half to him, half, defiantly, to Holroyd:

"There is only one ruler in all Nushirvan. But we are his wives. We have his interests at heart; we shine only as a reflection of his glory. When we advise him it is as instruments of his body. In this case we are the tools who sensed your lie. Therefore we advise torture—immediately."

She almost snapped the last word, and then sat glaring at Holroyd, who whistled ruefully under his breath. His



attempt to drive a wedge between husband and wives was backfiring badly. The hard wonder came: just what could torture that included, for instance, amputation do to a body such as his?

The speculation brought an ugly chill that ended as he saw the curious expression that was changing—*transforming*—the face of the blond wife.

She had seemed at first glance nondescriptly good-looking; her position as second from the Nushir's chair placed her as a lesser wife.

She grew different. She straightened physically, and the move seemed mental as well. Her eyes glowed with life; color surged into her cheeks. She sat very still for an instant, as if in deep thought, then she said in a ringing voice:

"Speak for yourself, Niyi. If the prince is speaking the truth—and what we know of Gonwonlane supports his statement—then he is our ally, not our enemy; and a conference under more gracious circumstances—after breakfast tomorrow morning—is in order.

"I suggest accordingly that our guest be furnished with a woman for the night and assigned an apartment."

There was silence. Twice, Niyi, the dark, parted her lips, twice she turned with clenched fist toward the blond woman, but each time her astonishment seemed to override both her voice and the will to action. She glanced finally at her lord and waited.

After a minute the Nushir was still stroking his smooth fat chin. But at last he began to nod his head. He said:

"It shall be so, for such is the conclusion I have also drawn. In view of the high rank of our guest he may choose one of my two wives here present. In the morning we shall talk, and then, if everything is satisfactory, a screer escort shall return the Lord Ineznio to his own lines."

He paused, ended: "Which of my two wives, great prince?"

Refusal didn't even enter into the problem. It would be a mortal insult. And the choice required scarcely a thought, so obvious it was. Holroyd said gravely:

"I select her who has been called Niyi, and thank you for thus honoring me, great Nushir. You shall not regret it."

He was thinking grimly: What a fool he'd be to leave the dark, hostile woman alone with her husband for a night of unopposed propaganda. The Nushir was speaking:

"I would have thought," he said in an interested tone, "that, like the others who have been thus honored, you would have chosen blond Calya." He shrugged, smiled: "It will be an interesting experience for you, Niyi."

He tugged at a silken cord that hung down from the ceiling. Instantly, attendants swarmed into the room. Within ten minutes Holroyd was alone with his wife-for-a-night.

There was a great, ornamented window at the far end of the main room. With scarcely a glance at the dark woman, Holroyd walked toward it and stared out. Three spread below him. Its dimly glowing street light sticks gave an overall effect of an old European city in partial blackout.

The sense of exhilaration that had come after the crossing of the bridge was stronger now. In spite of everything, tendrils of satisfaction coiled through his mind.

It was true, he thought, that he had suffered a defeat in having to cross the river of boiling mud, but he had also won his freedom to return to Gonwonlane. He would not again be led into a trap.

Just what the balance was between the defeat and the victory he, who knew so little, could not hope to judge.

It was probably adverse, but at least being free would give him a chance to think things over, prepare for the next onslaught—absolutely devastating to think of how swiftly he had been rushed along up to the present point. Right here and now he must draw a line and

say: No further; action henceforth *must* be based on information and the profoundest consideration.

Holroyd laughed curtly. What a chance. One man in a world that he knew almost nothing about, with great decisions to make, couldn't possibly learn anything of importance in time. Still, it felt better to be—free!

He drew his mind from speculation and remembered Niyi.

He would take her, naturally, in the sense that she had been offered. Any derilection on his part would probably be reported, and would be considered bad manners—not to be risked.

He turned from the window and stared in astonishment.

The dark woman was standing with one ear pressed against the corridor door, listening intently. She rolled her eyes and looked at Holroyd, and then—amazing action—put a finger to her lips in the ancient admonition. Finally, with a graceful flowing movement, she came gliding over.

"We shall have to act swiftly," she hissed. "You made things very difficult by selecting Niyi instead of Calya, whose body I entered just before she spoke in your favor. Now, I have had to switch to this one; and the blond woman will be remembering that she was possessed, not clearly—and that will give us a little time—but enough to alarm her eventually into speech."

She paused; and Holroyd said violently: "What the—"

He stopped and stood as still as stone, his eyes like two slits. So he was being rushed once more! Icy determination made his voice harsh:

"Who are you?"

The woman whispered: "I am she who climbed the great cliff, who tried to kill you, and who gave you the ring of Ptath. Search back in your mind: Did you tell anyone that you saw me? If not, then you must *know* that I am not Ineznia."

She rushed on, unheeding of his efforts to speak:

"We dare not delay; I swear it. At this very moment Ineznia is in the Nushir's central palace striving desperately to destroy the god chair of Ptath. The chair is the last of the—"

Her voice grew thick, as if her tongue was suddenly too big for her mouth. She swallowed hard, tried again, then gave up the sentence that had caused the painful stoppage. She finished urgently:

"We must go there without delay. Even an hour, *even* a minute might be too late. Ptath, I realize only too clearly how often you have been fooled. But it cannot be helped; you must take one more chance—now!"

The odd thing was that Holroyd's resolve, which had seemed so firm, so deep-rooted, should yield utterly before one verbal onslaught. But what she had said was true.

He *hadn't* told anyone about the gaunt woman; and Ineznia's very dismay at the sight of the ring was like a stamp of approval now on her who had given it to him.

Ineznia didn't know, DIDN'T know how this woman had come to him, even though she had probably guessed that she had come.

Therefore, this was the æon-imprisoned L'onee; and if L'onee was now telling him that he had no time to lose, then he hadn't.

Actually, now that he thought of it, Ineznia's action in having him kidnaped showed a contemptuous disregard of the suspicion it might arouse. She hadn't been like that in her earlier attitude. It must mean—

The culmination of her plans was in sight. The protective edifice that Ptath had built long ago was crashing.

The maddest thing was that, thinking thus, he was still standing here. But he couldn't help it. The weight of his hesitation, and the reason behind it, was too important to ignore.

He had been told that he must sit in the god chair of Ptath, and that by so

doing he would regain the old, tremendous god power of Ptath.

It sounded ludicrous, a veritable child's game. But that didn't begin to matter. What counted was that *both* Ineznia and L'onee had told him that it was so.

Why had Ineznia imparted to him one great truth among so many lesser lies? Why had she told him about the chair at all?

Curiously, just putting the mental questions, brought answers:

She had told him for the same reasons that had made it necessary for her to reveal in some way, by action or word, the other protectives now canceled. And besides telling him had been psychologically correct. It had focused his mind on that distant goal, the while she accomplished every one of her secondary purposes, and—

And now she was on the last lap.

Action on the most desperate scale was imperative. He saw that—L'onee—was watching him with wide, tragic eyes. He felt a brief, intense appreciation of the fact that she had not interrupted his necessary thought, then hurriedly he said:

"How can we leave here?"

"If you will follow me as if we were going for a walk," she breathed. "The warm flying clothes are in a chamber next to the screer aeries—Niyi is the chief wife. As Niyi I can command a screer escort at any time of the day or night without question, for any purpose. Come!"

Holroyd raced beside her for the door, then: "Wait!" he said. "There's a General Seyteil among the prisoners—is there some way that he could be provided with a screer and allowed to escape. I have an idea he could be doing valuable work in Gonwonlane while—"

L'onee cut him off: "It's impossible. Such an action would be utterly out of character. Besides, we haven't time for *anything!* Hurry!"

In fifteen minutes the flight was begun.

XVII.

It grew very cold. Yet still higher loomed the reaching mountains ahead, dark and bleak and savage under the strange, near stars.

But all was not bleakness. In all that freezing world, the maddest things were the raging volcanic fires that leaped and flared from a thousand craters, making the night hideous and terrible with red flame and red-black smoke.

Curiously, the scarlet splotches did not add light to the general dark. Each cone of fire seemed to hold itself aloof, and somehow the night around was darker, the nonvolcanic mountains seemed colder and more awesome.

Odder still, the screers avoided the air above the spitting craters, stayed instead up and out where the cold was unalloyed, like sheeted ice.

Distinctly, Holroyd felt the great, struggling bird beast, on which L'onee and he were mounted—felt it grow sluggish and weary. Twice, with a sharp anxiety, he saw it and the others of that concourse scramble desperately in their barely successful effort to breast up-jutting knobs of mountain.

Exactly when the downward journey began, he had no clear knowledge. Perhaps it was when his mind began with instinct of its own to reach ahead and strive to visualize what the end of the journey would bring.

In any event, suddenly the birds were flying easier, faster; and the air grew perceptibly warmer. A city sprinkled its light from below. Then another, and another.

Even the ground in between the larger masses of lights, was not all dark finally, but shot with countless streaky patches of dull-white glow points.

The first cities nestled in valleys between enormous peaks, but, swiftly, that jagged barrier yielded to foothills, then to a flatter land. The air grew balmy and the cities unending. The next one

was always in sight before the previous one so much as grew dim.

It was about an hour and a half after they left the foothills that L'onee turned in her saddle and shouted downwind at Holroyd:

"Khotahay, the capital!"

The way she spoke the name it had an exotic, a heart-quickening music in its pronunciation. But in the night the city looked like all the others except that it was bigger, and it spread to a range of hills in the north, and silhouetted against a broad river in the east. L'onee was speaking again:

"I almost flew to Khotahay yesterday instead of to—" The name she spoke was lost in the shouting of the wind. "I was in a panic after failing to locate you at any of the twelve bridges that cross the river of boiling mud. Time and again I tried to cross myself, and when I finally could, I knew that you had broken the sixth spell and that I had missed you. I knew all the while that I couldn't possibly keep an accurate watch on so many crossings.

"I was captured as I flew over the city, but, of course, I didn't mind. I had taken care to locate the central fort, and I immediately possessed the body of an important woman servant inside it. From her it was an easy jump at the proper time to the body of Calya, the Nushir's blond wife."

Holroyd listened to the brief explanation with but half his attention. The picture she had drawn filled little gaps in the continuity of her life stream since he had last seen her. But, staring now at the nearing capital, his thought leaped starkly ahead:

Ineznia was down there. And the chair of Ptath.

It was hard to imagine her. The intense, passionate creature that was the golden-haired goddess seemed unreal, up here in this night, with a whining wind tearing at his flat-held body, with the great, dark wings of the mighty animal he rode rising and falling in a mad repetition of violent movement.

The god chair evoked no image at all. His mind refused even to grope for a mental picture of the fantastic thing.

But it must exist down there! L'onee believed it; and Ineznia had planned everything on the certainty that the chair was a reality.

How could they be so sure, who had never been within hundreds of miles of the incredible creation? Yet—he had to admit it—they seemed to believe they knew. Would Ineznia risk everything on a vague chance? It seemed hardly likely.

It would be very dangerous to assume that Ptath had fooled her. And yet—

"If I had been Ptath—" Holroyd thought, and then smiled with a savage consciousness of the incongruity. He *was* Ptath. At least, there wasn't any other.

What a remnant he was. Angrily, Holroyd pushed the negation aside and forced his mind back to his original thought:

"If *I* had been Ptath," he reasoned grimly, "and I had mistrusted one of two women—or both, to play safe—I would not have left my main protective to any kind of chance at all. No matter what was done to it, or was thought to have been done to it, I'd have tried to figure something—something designed to shock, or frustrate, any schemer alive. I wouldn't just have left it a straight business of sit in the chair or else!"

There must be something—

Down, down swooped the screers, screaming. Lights flickered below; and in the glow a great courtyard was revealed. One by one the birds came down and made their separate runs like massive aircraft settling onto a landing field.

Men bowed low as Niyi's face was recognized. There was a scramble to help them with the removal of furs and a rush to open doors.

"Do not," commanded L'onee-Niyi,

"do not awaken the palace. The Nushir's guest and I shall proceed without escort."

There were soldier guards at intervals along the gleaming corridors who sprang to attention, great bearded men who looked strange in natty uniforms, and who stood very stiff, as the man and woman strode past.

Holroyd whispered finally: "Do you know where she is? Where the chair is?"

He felt tense, and terribly excited, and eager, like a fire that has suddenly found new fuel.

The crisis of his life was upon him.

Beside him, L'onee whispered: "I know exactly where it is. After all Niyi knew and—there it is—the door at the end of this corridor.

It was a big, ornamental entrance; and it was locked. With a steely determination, Holroyd tested his strength against its solidity. The hardwood shook and quivered from the smashing blow, but did not splinter.

"Wait!" L'onee said urgently. "There's no doubt that she's inside. But I'll have the guards break the door."

She finished with a cold satisfaction: "This is one time when we have the authority. There's not a body in the palace that she could usurp, and overrule Niyi. I—"

She stopped and said softly: "Ah!"

The door was opening in a leisurely fashion. Ineznia stood there just across the threshold. She had on a black gown that made her hair like a golden crown set above dark velvet. She was smiling, and she said:

"Enter. I've been expecting you."

Holroyd saw that there was triumph in every tiny line of the child face.

The woman positively glowed with satisfaction. Her blue eyes sparked with tiny yellow flashes and her smile waxed and waned, as if her joy was coming to her in wave on wave of flooding happiness. She spoke again, a variation of her first words:

"I've been watching for you. But, of course, without water it is impossible to tell an *essence* when it is in a body. Come in, both of you. I shall be glad to tell you all about everything."

Holroyd felt abruptly reckless, careless of consequences, as the consciousness of her victorious mood seeped deeper into his mind. Smiling grimly, he stepped forward and halted, teetering on his toes, as Niyi's voice rang with L'onee's warning:

"Ptath—wait! There's something wrong."

Holroyd recovered his balance, then stood very still. There was no fear connected with the paralysis, simply a great wonder, and the earlier sense of unreality grew stronger.

The unemotional conviction came that he was dreaming.

After a minute, however, he was still standing there studying that delicate face with its flickering smile; and after a few moments more the stiff thought came that girlish women who gloated were not good-looking.

There was suddenly something obscene in her satisfaction, an unhumanness. Once more the goddess spoke:

"How melodramatic we are, L'onee. Of course there is something wrong—the wrongness of defeat. What! You still hesitate. I assure you we shall not be disturbed. And you really *must* have a look at the chair that would have won for you had you arrived six hours ago."

Said the spider to the fly, Holroyd was thinking, won't you please come in.

The reference to the chair scarcely touched him. Instead, his mind absorbed itself in a contemplation of why Ineznia should be so sure they would not be disturbed. It was particularly odd as, out of the corner of his eye, he saw that a number of women were coming along the corridor.

A shocked thought came—Holroyd whirled on L'onee.

"It's just struck me that I've seen neither of you in possession of a man's body. Can—"

L'onee had been standing, frowning, as if she were searching for something that kept eluding her. Now, she looked up.

"Only women, Ptath, or female animals. There is a physical law involved that—"

She stopped and stared as Ineznia crumbled to the floor. Then she cried shrilly: "Ptath, she's gone to someone's body."

The women were behind her now, was still one of the five women, and she could shift to any of them.

He felt a stark and immense gathering consciousness of the danger that was here.

"Quick, L'onee," he urged, order the women to go away at once. The one that is dominated by Ineznia will try to kill Niyi, and thus drive you into a less authoritative body. *Hurry!*"

Her understanding must have been quicker than his words. Her voice was

and close. One of them was fumbling under a dress. A razor-thin stone knife flashed; and Holroyd, smiling with a savage understanding, caught L'onee—and took the flung knife in his side.

Still smiling, he jerked it out. He flicked a glance toward Ineznia; the goddess showed no sign of life. She ringing out in sharp command, cutting across his words. Obediently, three of the women began to walk back the way they had come. One of the remaining two stood uncertain, but the other shouted:

"Come back here. This is not Queen Niyi, but an imposter. The queen is

with our master, the Nushir, at the border, as we all know,"

The speaker was a powerful-looking creature, obviously a woman's superintendent of some kind. In response to her command the three who had been leaving, faced about, looking very frightened; and one of them called in a trembling voice:

"If this is so, why not call the guards?"

L'onee whispered from the shelter of Holroyd's body: "What shall I do—call the guards myself?"

Holroyd hesitated.

His brain wouldn't concentrate on the immediate threat. It kept flashing off in tangents, reaching out to grasp the larger meaning, the potentialities of what he was seeing. He had never realized it before, but—

What a terrible power it was that Ineznia and L'onee possessed, this ability to shift from body to body. They could enter anywhere, palace, fort, *anywhere* where there were women, and instantly kill right and left.

The confusion would be absolutely devastating. Nothing could possibly resist such demonic personalities. Entire fortifications must fall without a fight, in an insane cataclysm of fratricidal murder or self-inflicted death.

It was suddenly clear that the days of Nushirvan as a separate state were numbered. Its long immunity—shattered now that Ineznia could cross the river of boiling mud at will. Just why she hadn't long ago dominated the colossal land of Accadistran, which was apparently not protected, was something he'd have to find out, but—

Get back to the danger, here, *now!*

Utterly clear, of course, it was what had happened.

L'onee and he had arrived before Ineznia had accomplished her purpose. In spite of all her advance confidence, she hadn't been able, in the short time available, to negate the power of the god chair.

What a terrible fear she must have felt when his body smashed at the door.

Her recovery had been absolutely abnormally swift. Instantly, she had laid her plans, occupied the body of an important woman and sent these women to this corridor. Then, returning to her own body, she had come to the door and skillfully stalled for time.

Here was the result: Five women who, if properly handled, might be used successfully to destroy L'onee's body.

Afterward, all the uncontrolled witnesses could be killed, or forced to kill themselves. The one that remained would swear that Holroyd murdered Niyi and, once under such a charge, and in prison, he'd have the devil's own time getting back to the room of the god chair.

In the interim, Ineznia expected to accomplish her aim.

It was a pretty though desperate scheme, pitiful when compared to the five billion soldiers she could muster to do her will in Gonwonlane, but deadly for all that—not to be fooled with.

Holrpyd hissed at L'onee: "Yes, call the guards. After all, we can prove that you're Niyi by the escort that brought us from the border."

In a minute the guards had the women. And there was not even an attempt to pretend that L'onee was not Niyi. Too obviously Ineznia realized the hopelessness of that.

Too obviously, as he had analyzed, her whole plan had been adopted at the spur of the moment, under the pressure of unexpected events.

L'onee was commanding: "Lock those women in their rooms, but release them in the morning. I will take occasion at some later period to reprimand them for their insolence."

One of the guards glanced at the knife in Holroyd's hand, but all he did was point at Ineznia, who was rising to her feet; he said:

"What about her?"

L'onee smiled grimly, said coolly: "She's a victim. Let her be."

A minute later the three of them were alone.

The two women, Holroyd saw, were staring at each other. And only L'onee was smiling. He was about to step past them and enter the room when the silent intensity of that eye interchange penetrated to his consciousness.

He paused and glanced from one to the other, puzzled.

It was L'onee who broke the silence. She said in an unnatural drawl:

"We-e-l-ll, darling Ineznia, so you've overreached yourself in spite of all your scheming."

Her smile faded; she snapped: "Just a moment, Ptath, while I examine the threshold of this door. If she's managed to lay protective metal here anywhere we—"

She fell to her knees and pushed her fingers cautiously along the carpet. When she came to the door, Ineznia stepped forward with a swift movement and viciously kicked at her hand.

Deftly, laughing softly, L'onee caught the thrusting foot. Her lips twisted savagely; with all her strength she pushed.

Holroyd gasped as the delicately built Ineznia went spinning back into the room. She caught her balance, started forward again and then stopped with such a convulsive effort that Holroyd shivered, so terrible was the anger on her face.

It struck him for the first time how inconceivably violent was the hatred of these two women for each other.

Ineznia hissed: "When the six months are up, I shall destroy you a little piece at a time."

L'onee laughed, a brittle laugh. "So I have six months, have I? Thank you, my sweet, for telling me."

Still laughing in that brittle fashion, she turned to Holroyd. "So far as I can make out, there's nothing to hinder us going into the room."

She came to her feet and her laughter was a glowing thing as she said: "Oh, Ptath, Ptath, there's victory here; and all because she grew frightened at my escape."

Holroyd's puzzlement must have shown in his face, for L'onee explained swiftly:

"Her original intention was that you should attack Nushirvan, and thus cross the river of boiling mud. Moving with the army over those incredible mountains, it would have taken you weeks, perhaps months to reach this palace. And during all that time she could have been studying the chair in this room, and I'm sure she could have destroyed it under such circumstances.

"But that ring I gave you startled her. It was only Ineznio's seal ring, but when I was in the writing room getting it, I put some of my power into it. She recognized that as a declaration of war, and rather than give me time to be a nuisance to her, she acted as she did."

She laughed again, the slightly harsh but gleeful laugh of Niyi. Ineznia stood without moving just inside the chair room. Her face was the color of chalk, but her eyes were blue and cold and deadly as she said:

"You realize, I hope, that you at least will die, L'onee. Any power Ptath may derive from the chair is not *full* power. Only from prayer does power come, and I have long ago seen to it that that does not exist for him. And, furthermore, he will not be long in joining you in the dungeon."

She went on, more airily: "He will perhaps have a little more power than you now possess." She laughed with an easy confidence, continued: "Now that I have resigned myself to this partial defeat, the rest doesn't matter. Once again I suggest to you the key word, Accadistran."

"You devil beast!" said L'onee.

They stood very still, the dark woman and the golden woman, staring at each other; and, glancing first at one, then the other, though he understood only dimly what they were discussing, Hol-

royd had the sudden conviction that he oughtn't to be here. He oughtn't to be seeing the naked souls of these women.

It cost him a genuine effort to break the thrall. He shook himself—a mental and physical movement it was—and stepped across the threshold into the large room.

He was vaguely aware of L'onee following, of Ineznia turning to watch.

Then he forgot them both.

XVIII.

The room in which Holroyd found himself was, except for the chair, unfurnished. It was built entirely of stone, floors, walls, ceiling, all unalleviated stone. Gray stone it was, uncracked, yet in spite of this the effect was of great, of incredible age.

The room was *old*.

The chair occupied a portion of the room to Holroyd's left. It shone. It was so bright it hurt his eyes. It was an enormous misty creature, insubstantial and quivery. Veins of crystal light glittered in it; opalescence clouded its surface; splashes of amber streaked it, and bands of vermilion interlaced with stains of pallid ochre.

It glittered like some intricate jewel, and its shape was that of a perfect cube with dimensions of fifteen feet.

It floated above the floor.

It tantalized; it entranced. It had utterly no relation to the solid realities all around. Holroyd walked toward it, then stood in a maze of fascination, staring up at it.

It was distinctly *up*. The lower surface of the cube flickered at least ten feet above his head.

He found himself, automatically, looking around, searching for something that would enable him to climb, and sit on the great, glowing "seat." The action of looking brought awareness of the two pairs of eyes that were staring, *glaring*, at him.

Two pairs of eyes, each pair ablaze with its own excitement. Two pairs of eyes expecting a god to be born. Two pairs of eyes—

It was curiously hard to break the dazing, the hypnotic intensity of them, but Holroyd shook his head slightly; and it was as if a rock had fallen into the glassy pool that was his mind. The widening ripples broke the spell.

He saw, then, that stone rungs were carven into the stone wall to the left of the chair. Up they ran, straight to the ceiling and *along* the ceiling.

They ended above the chair.

By climbing up he could swing himself by his hands from rung to rung, and drop directly down onto the chair.

An athletic child could have done it without a second thought.

The One Who Is Strong should do it without a second thought.

But the second thought, the hesitation, came even as he walked slowly toward that ladder of chiseled stone.

The thought had nothing to do with his will to sit in the chair. He was going to sit in it. There was no alternative.

Even if he had had proof that the goddess had managed to tamper with it, he would still have had no alternative but sooner or later to test the effect of it upon the body of Ptath.

No, there was no question at all about that: He must sit in the god chair. Only—

It was clear now that it wouldn't be enough. In a way, he had known from the first moment since he had learned that god power came from prayer—from that first knowledge had come the realization that the chair alone would not be enough to make him Ptath, the thrice greatest.

The chair was at most the firing cap, a detonator; or, rather, it was a battery of stored power that would start him off with power, which could later be replenished and increased from the source of god power itself—the prayers of billions of women.

Prayers cunningly suppressed by Ineznia. And not likely to resume in

any measure during a conceivable period of time.

Religious habits had in their texture a conservatism unmatched by any other human institution.

He began to climb up the stone ladder, but he was thinking: The victory he was about to gain would be purely defensive. His own life would be saved, but L'onee would die, and the soul-destroying temple civilization would go on and on.

He had a sudden sense of futility. He glanced over his shoulder at the two women standing there, eyes fixed upon him.

Hard to imagine they had once been his wives. The passionate and ambitious golden-haired child woman, the dark, intense L'onee.

How did he knew her real body was brunette. He had not seen her since his arrival in Gonwonlane.

Yet he knew.

Perhaps it was because he was swinging, hand over hand along the ceiling; and the chair was nearer.

Nearer; then it was directly below.

It shone up at him, like a great mirror that gave off an intense, shimmering jewel light of its own.

In a moment he would be god.

Blankly, he hung there, looking down. Then he dropped. And instantly sat down.

And began to sink *into* the dazzling cube. Abruptly he vanished. Long minutes passed. His leg protruded first from the bottom. He fell to the floor sixteen feet below.

The cube shimmered for a moment, then made a faint *poof* sound, and was gone, like a burst soap bubble.

On the floor Holroyd lay without movement, like a dead man.

The silence was broken by the tinkling laughter of Ineznia. L'onee twisted with a jerky movement to stare at the golden goddess. Her eyes widened as she saw the unalloyed glee in the child face.

With a mad uncertainty she half ran, half stumbled to the still body that lay on the floor, half fell, half flung herself beside it.

She tugged and finally pulled the dead weight of Holroyd until he lay on his back. She put her fingers to his eyes, opened them. They closed limply as she withdrew her trembling hand.

The laughter of Ineznia rang almost maniacally in her ears, as, one by one, L'onee forced herself to touch the life spots of the still body.

Color crept back into her cheeks.

"He's still alive!" she breathed. Then knelt there, conscious of a gathering bewilderment.

Behind her, the other's laughter ended on a mocking note: "Of course he's alive. I wasn't able to find a single death energy in the entire structure of the chair. It's the purest complex of positive forces ever conceived. My intention was to find some method of destroying it, as he has now done."

There was a complacency in the golden goddess' tone as she finished, that brought to L'onee a terrible exasperation. She twisted around, raged:

"Don't try to pretend that you had anything to do with it!"

"I'm pretending nothing." Ineznia was cool, collected. "I'm as surprised as you are. But, of course, now that it's happened, it's quite obvious what took place."

L'onee was silent, stunned. It wasn't obvious to her. If it had been she felt terribly sure that she would have had at least an advance inkling and prevented the catastrophe.

She parted her lips to ask for explanation. But one look at that avid, delicate face brought abrupt memory that Ineznia never answered questions. She boasted.

It didn't take long.

"It is clear," Ineznia said in a matter-of-fact tone that only partially concealed her exultation, "that Ptath never intended to experience the power of the

chair until he already had *in* him the full weight of the prayer power.

"Lacking that insulation, he has been temporarily burned out." She frowned. "A comparison is difficult to make, but it would surprise me if he was ever again capable of becoming a pole of power.

"Why did he need the chair at all if he expected to have already in him the power of the prayers of billions of women? That is even more difficult to answer, but it is well to remember that Ptath intended always to remain greater than any possible combination we might form against him. Therefore—"

Ineznia shrugged gracefully. Watching her, the thought came to L'onee that the goddess-ruler was having a special difficulty of her own, the difficulty to keep from shouting with happiness. The woman was postively mad with excitement.

She stood there; and she glowed. She made little, quick movements with her fingers, and even her body seemed to shiver, as if thrill on thrill of ecstasy was coursing through it.

Her whole being was *alive* with joy.

Almost, it was a miracle that she could keep her voice so calm, so reasoning as she went on:

"Naturally, even though he has ceased to be a danger to me, I shall take no chances at all. I will transport him now to my great capital, Gadir, in Accadistran, and let him go the way of those Gonwonlanians who have been kidnaped."

Her laughter rang like metal clashing with stone, so hard was the sound of it.

"It will be interesting to see what happens when a god body is torn to pieces. After that"—she paused tantalizingly—"as soon as those fool rebels launch the attack on Nushirvan, I shall order my sky riders to act."

L'onee stared at Ineznia whitely. Twice, she tried to speak, but each time only managed to swallow her horror. But Ineznia couldn't have missed a single twist of her expression, so leechlike was her gaze.

She laughed, then said with a ringing savagery: "Don't try to tell me that it isn't necessary. There's only one kind of union that Gonwonlane will ever accept with Accadistran—the union of crushing defeat."

She added, almost as an afterthought: "And while my war flyers are about it, I shall see to it that every prayer stick in Gonwonlane is their loot. No chances will I take, none whatsoever. I'll let the praying of the Accadistrans support my power, until the last possibility of woman-praying is stamped out of Gonwonlane.

"Ptath, of course, will be long dead by then."

She was silent; her eyes were starry, almost gentle, as she mused finally, aloud: "I haven't decided yet on the type of government I will set up when the last wrinkle of resistance has been erased. The temple system has weak as well as good points, as witness the large number of rebels in existence under its aegis. Those insolent scoundrels, daring to oppose me!"

Once again she was silent; then grimly: "I *cannot* brook opposition. Except for that, and if I had the old Ptath's ability to co-ordinate the actions of masses of men, I might even be tempted to restore the curious type of government that he tolerated. I never did quite understand its inner meaning, but it was very exciting until after he departed, when it became quite unruly and intolerable.

"You will remember, L'onee, darling, that was the first time I overrode you; and, actually, it was the result of our quarrel at that period which finally convinced me that a government of two sovereign goddesses was an unendurable paradox."

In a vague way, as the other talked, L'onee had been aware that Ineznia was edging closer. With a gasp now, she realized the goddess' intention. She turned, straightened—too late.

Ineznia flung herself, literally, onto Holroyd's body and clung there while L'onee struck and tugged at her frantically.

"Watch out, you fool," Ineznia breathed furiously, "or you'll come along."

She *couldn't* let the warming matter. She felt the change. Without water it was a slow process, a straining, but after minutes there was movement through darkness. Almost instantly, she was lying on hard ground; and it was day.

She had a sense of terror not her own. It grew out of the sobbing and moaning of women, the crying of children, the high-pitched voices of men. Countless women and children and men clamorous with horror and fear. The sound alone, the terrible sound, brought knowledge of where she was.

Not that she had been in doubt.

L'onee stood up, searched hastily with her eyes and sighed with relief. Of Ineznia there was no sign. But Ptath lay on a cot that rose level with her knees.

He looked dead. He lay without movement or twitching of any kind, without any indication of returning consciousness. After a minute, L'onee sent her gaze again wearily to take in her surroundings.

Ptath and she were inside a walled inclosure. The inclosure was about a kanb square, and it was packed with humanity. In the distance beyond one great line of wall she could see the trained screers of the Zard wheeling and flying, formation after formation diving down out of sight.

She shuddered with a desperate horror of what was going on out there. Here, in one of thousands of training areas for screers, was the dead end for the kidnaped of Gonwonlane.

Her gaze came back from distance. She saw for the first time that the cot on which Ptath lay was in a special, little, fenced-off area. The area was thick with other cots, on almost every one of which sprawled one or more human beings.

Individuals would get up and walk dazedly off, but always others would be brought in to fill the vacant spaces. Children, men, women—

L'onee sat down on the edge of Ptath's cot and waited. She began to feel uneasy. She thought desperately:

Ineznia wouldn't delay, not now. It was too important. She'd have Ptath killed the moment it could be managed, whether he was conscious or unconscious.

First of all, she'd take the true Ineznia body back to the city of Ptath—she wouldn't risk *that* in a city where metal was reasonably common. Then she'd send her essence back to the palace at Gadir, enter the body of the woman Zard of Accadistran, and give the necessary orders.

As fast as screers could fly and grimbs run, soldiers would rush to obey them.

In a surge of panic she caught the still body and shook it violently. "Wake up, Ptath," she cried in a low voice. "Wake up!"

The body did not stir. It lay in a deathlike trance, limp beneath the clutching fingers of her hand.

The thought came: If he was really beyond aid, then she ought to leave him, leave this body of Niyi, and go back to Nushirvan. There were things that she could do, even little things might help to prevent the cataclysm of terror and death that Ineznia was planning.

She mustn't stay here when continents trembled on the brink of dreadful doom.

Still she hesitated. The sun, which had been low in the east, tilted toward a mid-morning position. The dust of a half million restless feet thickened the air like a gray mist. The day grew hot, then stifling.

Two men trudged toward her, carrying a third man. One said:

"There doesn't seem to be a cot for my brother."

The other man lowered the head and

shoulders of the unconscious one. He said wearily:

"What does it matter? He's going the way of the rest of us."

"I'll get a cot," said the first speaker quietly. "My brother's in a bad way. He—"

He saw that he was talking to a retreating, unheeding back. He broke off. Then he came over to L'onee.

"I hope you don't mind if I move him"—he pointed at Holroyd—"off the cot. My brother's unconscious."

L'onee stared. The demand was so outrageous that for a moment she thought she hadn't heard it correctly. Then she parted her lips to speak, but before she could utter the scathing words, the man bent forward and started to lift Holroyd from the cot.

With a gasp she caught his arms and pushed him. His fingers clutched her arms as he stumbled back, jerked her to her feet. He was strong and there was a blind, stubborn will in him. Her only thought was to shove him, and that was like pushing a heavy weight. In a minute the body of the Nushir's pampered first wife was utterly exhausted. She was half leaning against the man when his whisper beat into her ears.

"Go to Nushirvan!" he hissed. "Go to Nushirvan! I'll meet you there in the Khotahay palace—later."

L'onee froze. Then she shook the man in a weak frenzy of incredulity, but he was staring at her suddenly with a gathering blankness that changed to shock and horror. He gasped:

"I must have been mad. I don't know what got into me. I'm sorry."

She was too exhausted even to feel pity. She staggered back toward the cot, started to sink down on it, and—

And straightened in dismay.

Ptath's body was gone.

The tremendous shock faded after a long minute. Understanding poured through her: She should have realized the instant the man spoke those words about Nushirvan.

Ptath had thought it possible all these hours that Ineznia might be in a nearby body watching. He didn't want Ineznia to know that he could transfer himself from body to body.

He didn't want Ineznia even to suspect that he was the god Ptath and so he had caused a distraction and slipped away.

"If you don't mind," said a familiar man's voice, "I'll put my brother on this cot now."

L'onee glanced sharply at the tired face. But the fellow's expression showed no sign of what she was looking for.

There was no reason, of course, why it should. The man had served Ptath's purpose. And she had her instructions: *Go to Nushirvan!*

Still she stood there hesitating because Ineznia must be convinced, utterly convinced, that she was safe forever.

The thought was like a flashed signal. There was a movement on the high main wall to her right, then to her left.

Ladders—soldiers swarming down them. In a half dozen minutes they had overflowed the "hospital" area, blocking the gates, lining up along the "hospital" fence.

Ruthlessly, they pushed cots out of the way, knocking them over, human contents and all.

Great light-saws were brought into action. The main wall began to crumble. In not more than ten minutes a fifteen-foot-wide gap had been cut clean through the thirty-foot-high main wall.

Through the gap rode a woman mounted on a monster grimb.

The woman was tall, slender, yet of commanding build. Her brown eyes were bright, almost amber in their glowing intensity. Her face was lean, finely formed, and proud.

For L'onee, the lines of pride alone would have identified that glorious creature. Physically, Ineznia had made an unsurpassable selection. The woman Zard of Accadistran looked every inch a queen, fully capable of carrying off her

great role as ruler of more than twenty billion subjects.

The question was, was Ineznia in possession of the body now?.

The grimb halted. Soldiers rushed forward carrying a set of glittering steps, down which the woman Zard walked with an easy grace.

Smiling bleakly, she walked over to L'onee, where the latter stood beside the cot that Ptath had occupied such a short time before. She glanced at the man lying on the cot, started to face L'onee—and then twisted back to the cot, her eyes becoming wide and awful.

She started to speak, then she made a gesture with her hands, a crazy, scratching gesture toward the face of the stranger who lay on the cot. As if she would change those alien features by violence into the shape she had expected to see.

With a visibly awful effort, she restrained herself and whirled, and cried in a low, intense voice:

"Where is he, you incredible fool? He was here a few minutes ago."

Now, thought L'onee, *now*, this minute, she must convince this maddened ruler that her own false analysis of what had happened to Ptath in the god chair was correct.

Trembling, L'onee parted her lips to utter the abasing words, the horrible words that would give to Ineznia the great personal satisfaction that, in all the long years of L'onee's imprisonment, she had striven to gain.

Abruptly, briefly, it was impossible to say the devastating words—without some preliminary, anything that would make the plunge into ignominy even fractionally easier. Shakily, she said:

"So you've run into the old difficulty, Ineznia, that even a goddess cannot be in two places at once."

Curiously, it was instantly simpler to take the next step. She went on wearily: "Well, it doesn't matter. When he wakened up, I thought I'd give him the same chance as these other poor

wretches. I sent him out into the crowd. Ineznia—"

She paused; her face contorted with the sheer effort of will. She thought savagely: You proud fool, this is life or death. The very fact that Ptath doesn't want Ineznia to know proves that he hasn't got enough power to damage her.

Beyond all doubt he needed time to plan, to think. No matter what the cost, she must see that he got it. She said in a thick, choked voice:

"Ineznia, I beg you, do you understand, I *beg* you not to launch this unnecessary war. You've won. If you want Accadistran and Gonwonlane to form a mixed race, you can do it in a dozen normal ways: intermarriages, forced if you must, but without mass murder. Ineznia, please, please do not launch this war."

She saw that the brown eyes of the woman, that had been like violent pools a minute before, were changing—*the* change that was absolutely vital. Sardonically, god, those eyes stared at her; the mocking voice of Ineznia the Zard came:

"Poor L'onee! As ever you are incapable of rising above your humanness. There is locked in your words, my sweet, and not very securely locked, an hysteria verging on the sentimental. Know, my dear, that a goddess must be like the wind, which transports the evil odors as impartially as it bears the fragrance of a field of flowers. I assure you I am not being willfully cruel. It is simply that alien peoples do not merge naturally, and I now decree that the days of separate nationalities are over. So it shall be."

L'onee said drably: "This is what Ptath feared in the old days; it was what he saw growing within himself: a remorseless impatience with human weakness, a ruthless disregard of the race from which we, all three of us, were originally sprung.

"It was to prevent that beast god from appearing that he merged himself with the race. He—"

She stopped as she saw that the woman was not listening. The woman Zard, whose body Ineznia occupied, had turned, was staring out into the mass of humanity that milled sluggishly in the vast inclosure beyond the stone "hospital" fence. Ineznia said slowly:

"So he's out there, is he? Well, he can't escape. No one ever has. I'll have Ineznio's portrait shown to all the guards at the chute, and when *his* turn comes I'll be notified. I want personally to see him die. Meanwhile—"

She faced L'onee, a twisted smile on her lips: "You will be glad to know that this morning I gave the order for the attack on Gonwonlane. Nothing that anybody can do can stop the forces I have now set in motion, so ponderous are they. Even *I* couldn't stop them."

Her smile grew savage. "We shall now see what happens when one general in two bodies plans the strategical position of both armies. Well, good-by, L'onee; darling. I'm saving your body for you. I want to destroy you and it together."

She whirled away, climbed the bright steps to the back of the grimb. In ten minutes, masons were at work filling the gap in the wall.

L'onee couldn't decide; not right away. She stood near one of the gates, fighting the impulse to rush into that human anthill.

The very idea was ridiculous. Even Ineznia with all her hard will to find Ptath had taken a single look out over that sea of heads and realized the utter impossibility of locating one man.

She mustn't do anything foolish. She must go to Nushirvan, do what she had originally planned herself—and wait for Ptath.

Immensely important as was Ineznia's announcement of the frightful war she had ordered, Ptath couldn't be told until he came to the rendezvous.

Just what he would do when he did

learn the truth, she couldn't picture, couldn't imagine. The attack seemed final, decisive, all-conquering, capable of utterly nullifying even a Ptath with prayer power behind him, which he didn't have.

A wave of hopelessness surged through her, a numbing sense of events too big for anybody. The attack was ordered, the culminating crime of a goddess' base scheming. By tonight the trained killer screers of the woman Zard would be flying across the narrow, old sea of Teths, and—

With a shudder, L'onee forced the dreadful image out of her brain, felt a brief pity for Niyi, whom she must leave behind, and then launched herself toward Nushirvan.

XIX.

In spite of intervening cots, Holroyd covered the distance from his own cot to the nearest gate in approximately five seconds. Reaching the gate, he pushed with relentless strength into the human mass that surged there at the edge of the "hospital" area.

One last brief glance he flung rearward. And saw that L'onee was still struggling with the man who had tried to put his brother in Holroyd's cot.

No one else, particularly no woman, was moving. If Ineznia was there in some sick woman's drab body, she was not revealing herself by the slightest untoward action.

It *looked* as if he was safe.

He pressed on with a grim will to make sure of it, and came after a little to more open ground. Instead of one human being to every square foot, there was one to every two feet.

The difference was perceptible, but that was all. It was still like moving in quicksand, or in a heavy sea; no strength seemed adequate in itself.

Nevertheless, the difference was there. It buoyed him up during the two fantastic hours that followed. Slowly, however, the shocked realization crept home that his plan, to find *some* place where he could safely leave his body, had no meaning in this restless ocean of human driftwood.

Noon came and passed. An hour later he was still struggling within a stone's throw of the same long-stretching main wall that formed, farther back, one flank of the "hospital"—pushing, fighting, at times surging helplessly with the crowd.

The stark thought came finally: Surely, there were entrances or exits to this incredible concentration camp, gateways that would be guarded, naturally, but that didn't matter. The thing was, where were they?

He came to a man who looked more intelligent than frightened. Holroyd shouted: "How are we taken out of here? And where?"

The man stared at him blankly. Ten other men in succession gave him the same mindless look. It was like beating his head against the massive wall that loomed enormous to his right.

Briefly, Holroyd ceased his pressure against the drift of the crowd. He let himself sway along like a leaf in a slow current, an eddying movement assessing his position.

He had to find a place where he could be sure that his body would not be trampled. Physically, he was caught in this immense human trap, at least until he could find some guarded gate to the outside. His essence he could project, but bodily transport after the manner of Ineznia was not in his power.

Caught . . . caught in this monstrous mass of mindlessly moving human beings.

There must be some way; there *must* be. He was starting forward again, determinedly when he heard the bellowing voice.

It required a moment to locate the source of the voice. But abruptly he saw that a man was standing on top of the main wall fifty yards away, a man with a megaphone, through which he was bellowing.

Before that sound the babble of the

nearby crowd faded a little. Farther-away, there was no diminishment—but after a moment Holroyd was able to make out what the man was saying:

"—Carpenters and men with ideas for killing screers should go to the carpenters pit—over there beside the chute."

The man pointed toward the far wall, then repeated his call. Beside Holroyd, a man said:

"It's a trick to get us nearer the chute. I'm staying right here."

The trick, Holroyd thought grimly as he pressed through the reluctantly yielding throng in the direction the man had indicated, the trick was much, much smarter than that. Victims thinking up methods to kill, or defend themselves from screers, so that the Accadistran general staff could devise training methods for the great birds under the most trying conditions.

The carpenter's pit should be an ideal place from which, tonight, to launch his essence to Nushirvan. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to learn a few things about killer screers in action.

It took less time than he expected to reach the far wall. The pack was not so tight during the last quarter klanb. A sprinkling of brave men and women loitered casually in the area around the chute, but the end result of their bravery was that they went first.

Swarms of tall, dark, handsome men rounded them up into groups of a hundred and herded each group toward a hole in the towering wall.

Always, it was the dark men who came back through that chute, never a blond.

If the victims screamed in their agony out there, the sound was not audible above the uproar here of the victims-to-be.

Holroyd could see finally what seemed to be the carpenter's pit: an inclosure with high walls built against the main wall, and extending through or under the main wall, out to the far side.

Twice, as he headed for it, dark spearmen tried to include him in a hundred group. Shamelessly, and at a reckless speed, he sprinted aside, threading through the thinning crowd.

There was a mob in front of the pit gate, from beyond which came the sound of wood and stone hammers. Individual resentments flared as Holroyd pressed toward the gate. Sharp cries came:

"Get back in line!" "Wait your turn!" "I'll punch you one!"

Punches came and violent counter-shoves, but his strength was like a machine-driven steel bar. In five minutes he was at the gate.

A dozen powerful men stood there, half of them armed with stone-tipped lances, half with bows that had arrows ready-thrust against the dark gut strings.

The men wore headbands with feathers in them; and the one with the most feathers—four, Holroyd counted meticulously—must be the chief officer.

In a flash of power tension he projected his essence at the commander. Possession of the brain was an instantaneous accomplishment.

There was a sense of a ferocious personality resisting—then:

"That man next!" he cried in a deep voice and pointed at his own body, which stood, tall, lean, tan-faced, skillfully propped among several other pressing bodies.

He waited till two spearmen caught the Ptath body; then—back inside it and into the carpenter's pit.

The carpenter's pit was about two hundred yards square. And, just as he had observed, it extended *under* the massive main wall, projecting about a hundred yards out into whatever was beyond.

Holroyd paused in a blaze of curiosity to let his mind absorb the overall picture. There were benches, rows of them, with one or two men working at each bench.

They seemed to have endless supplies of wood and stone, which was natural

enough, if the Accadistran military organization was co-operating. Their tools were great pots of glue and wooden light-saws.

Holroyd watched, fascinated, as a man at the nearest bench touched one of the light-saws to a stone. The instrument had no effect at all on the wielder's fingers, but it sheared through the stone like a hot knife cutting butter.

He had first seen the remarkable things in the service depots of the Gonwonlane army. But then he hadn't dared show any special interest.

Now, he didn't have time.

As he turned to move on, a thickset man hurried toward him. "You're new, eh?" the man said briskly. "This way, please. We'll show you what we're fighting, then put you to work. Here's your number, 347."

The number was on an armband, which the man tied swiftly around Holroyd's left arm above the elbow. He went on earnestly:

"Don't lose that; don't let anyone tear it off. Any person who won't work, or who is found without a number at the moment when we're called upon to provide a victim, goes first. Otherwise, it goes by number."

He finished: "There's two hundred of us in here. And, except for the boss up there, we make a complete turnover every two months. The difference between us and those others out there is that we get food three times a day; they only get it in the morning, and they never last longer than a month. We do go, mind you; No. 147 was with the last batch. Any questions?"

Holroyd found himself liking the man. He saw with a startled glance that the fellow's number was 153. Which meant that this was probably his last full day alive.

Yet he looked cool, eager, intense.

"Good man," Holroyd said. "I like to see bravery in the face of hell. What's your name?"

"Cred, sir," the man said. He broke off roughly. "What in Nushirvan am I doing, calling you sir! Come along."

Smiling thinly, Holroyd followed. Clearer and clearer it was becoming that he had made no mistake in pretending to unconsciousness from the first moment that the power of the god chair dissolved into his body.

He had been awake throughout the long process, intensely awake, like a beast with senses sharpened to an agonizing pitch.

Only there wasn't, and hadn't been, any agony.

And there was no beast. Just Peter Holroyd, captain, U. S. tank corps, acquiring the peculiar and curious ability to project his essence anywhere.

It was a tremendous power; his earlier analysis of the Nushir's vulnerability to it had already convinced him of that. But by itself his own power of projection was inadequate to cope with Inez-

nia's control of governments and with her ability to send her entire body through space.

And besides, in that first, flashing, tremendous instant he had recognized that his previous logic was also correct about the chair being only a reservoir of stored power which, once used up, could only be replaced from the very fount of god force, in his case the praying of devout women.

Instant realization that he must practice duplicity— The conversation between Ineznia and L'onec in itself justified the entire deception. Never would the sealed lips of L'onec have been able to tell him so much.

Not till then did the vague, grim plan form: So she was going to attack, was she? If he could stop that attack short of success, then Ineznia was doomed.

Wizard she might be, but one thing about people she had forgotten. Or despised. Or perhaps never known: Human nature!

Human nature would defeat the goddess of earth IF—

"Here we are," said Cred.

Holroyd saw that a tall, gray-faced, gray-eyed, gray-haired man stood at the parapet. The man turned as Cred finished:

"Commander, this is a new one. I'm showing him."

"Good!" said the old man listlessly. "Let him see!"

At first, Holroyd saw only screers flying back and forth over a great arena. There was an immense grandstand in the near foreground, crowded with men watching the spectacle. But that was but an environment, which he scarcely noticed.

Swarms of screers, masses of screers. After a moment, Holroyd saw something else: only one out of every ten of the great bird beasts had a rider on its back; yet they flew in unison, like planes in formation.

Suddenly, as if they had received a signal, a group of ten broke off and dived toward the ground.

For the first time Holroyd saw that there were victims on the ground below the birds. A hundred men and women, mostly men, but the women were there.

Cold, his mind like a metal shaft, his eyes forced to pitiless observation, Holroyd watched the drama unfold.

The victims defended themselves. They had curious mushroom-shaped shields that they ducked under, and from which they poked at their voracious enemies with long lances.

The birds evaded the lances with a trained skill and plucked the defenders from under their hopeless shelters, like robins pulling worms out of the ground.

It was over in about four minutes. Instantly, hundreds of baby screers swarmed from aeries in a massive stone building far to the right and fell to feeding.

"They start them young on meat, don't they?" Holroyd said in a voice that was rock steady.

The commander seemed not to have heard, but Cred looked at Holroyd, startled. Before the man could speak, Holroyd snapped savagely:

"Never mind! What I want to know is, who the devil devised those pitiful mushroom shields?"

Once more the astounded Cred parted his lips as if to say something; but this time it was the gray-haired man who cut him off, who said wearily:

"And may I ask what—"

He stopped. He had turned and now he seemed to see Holroyd for the first time.

His eyes widened. Then he shook his head in a gesture of terrible disbelief; then—

"Prince Ineznio!" he breathed. "Prince—Ineznio!"

He fell to his knees. Tears streaked down his leathery cheeks. He caught Holroyd's hand and pressed rough lips to it.

"I knew it," he whispered. "I knew

the goddess would sooner or later send someone. I knew that this blasphemy could not go on forever. Oh, thank the goddess, thank the goddess!"

Holroyd forced himself to stand very still. It was hard because there was a rage gathering in him, a rage so awful that his body threatened to shatter.

Until this instant he had held himself almost as cold as the icy-volcanic mountains of Nushirvan, so cold outside, yet so blazing hot inside, that his whole being had trembled in a terrible, precarious balance of forces.

Now, that balance was breaking.

Thank the goddess! What a monstrous obscenity. Thank the goddess! Vile, lecherous, lascivious witch!

Wretched, debauched, wanton, bloody, devil woman!

The mad fury faded, yielded to a great tenderness that had in it a bleak knowledge that this commander's recognition of—Ineznio—and his faith in the goddess, would be helpful to his own plan.

Holroyd said gently: "Arise, marshal, and keep that faith alive during the still-hard days ahead. The goddess has indeed sent me"—he spoke the lie without a qualm—"and has granted me great powers to deal with the hideous evil that is here."

He went on more urgently: "But surely, marshal, you have evolved better defenses against those man killers than the wooden umbrellas."

The marshal was straightening. It was absolutely amazing how his face had changed. There were still tears, but he wiped them away with an angry gesture of his hand, and said in a ringing voice:

"I have, indeed, sir. I have, indeed. I've been here since the beginning of the kidnaping of Gonwonlanian citizens, seven years ago, and I have yet to let those out there"—he made a contemptuous gesture toward the grandstand across the arena—"see a single one of my good ideas in action.

"Look!" He raced down the steps into the pit, came up with a light-saw. "Here's a simple, one-man defense I've developed."

He sketched rapidly in the solid stone, casually cutting grooves with the point of the light-saw.

"It's a long, light, strong pole of the common gand wood, forked at one end like a V. The defender jabs the V over the screer's neck as it runs toward him, then instantly shoves the point of the stick into the ground.

"The flying screer is a very curious animal, not too bright, with a limited capacity for absorbing instructions. Those out there"—the officer waved a hand toward the sky—"have been trained to duck spear thrusts. If they fail, however, they push right on regardless, depending on their immensely tough leather breast skin and the almost inclosing bone underneath to protect them.

"Thus with the V pole, the screer will continue pushing forward, beating his wings. The combined effect of that will be to lift him up from the ground; which exposes his soft under belly to lance or arrow.

"There will be many deaths, of course, but as you can see, everybody will be able to manage some sort of defense. If you wish, I shall send some out with the next hundred-group."

"Send out two," said Holroyd. "It isn't that they can possibly retrain a billion screers, but there's another reason for caution."

It wouldn't do, he thought laconically, for the goddess to connect his merging with the crowd with a new development in the defensive-offensive tactics of the screer victims.

More tensely his thought went on: *This was it!* Lips slightly parted, teeth showing, he watched the two V-pole wielders kill four screers before they were attacked by several birds simultaneously and pulled down.

THIS WAS IT. Harder grew the conviction. It would be a heartbreakingly long time before anything could be done on the necessary scale; and there were other things to watch and learn of this commander's experience. Only—

Tonight he must escape. Every extra hour in this limited area would give the goddess so much more time to locate him. A world of decency depended on him.

Discovery would be fatal!

So tonight it must be, perhaps when the food was brought in—but tonight!

XX.

A stretcher prepared in advance for his body; a warning to Cred and the commander to show neither surprise nor

alarm; then entrance into the body of the chief officer in charge of the men who brought the food—that was the beginning.

Quietly, Holroyd the officer directed that the stretcher be picked up. The two soldiers to whom he gave the order obeyed without a word, and the others said nothing.

There was a corridor, then, in a brightly lighted building that was thick with the odor of cooked food. The corridor divided abruptly in two, one branching off at an angle of forty-five degrees to the right, the other at the same angle to the left. Most of the men headed up the left corridor; but Holroyd directed the stretcher bearers to the right.

They came presently to a door. As they were going down the stone steps outside into the thickening twilight, a multifeathered officer stopped and stared at the body. He was parting his lips to speak when Holroyd's essence crashed into his mind.

The officer entered the building at a brisk walk and headed along the corridor toward an open doorway that Holroyd had noticed as he and his two carriers passed it a minute before. Men sat inside the room the door opened upon; they were drinking some pale purple liquid that could have been grape juice.

He left the officer there at a table and flashed back into the mind of the other. The man, he saw, had waited there on the steps, too bewildered to organize himself. Under Holroyd's guidance, the fellow hurried along after the two trudging stretcher bearers.

They came to a long, wide, dim street that was flanked by a great wall. The sight of the great barrier brought a thrill. The wall! The outer wall of the human slaughterhouse.

With a shock he grew aware that soldiers were patrolling the base of the great wall. One of them had paused and was curiously staring at the still form of Ptath.

"Down that street!" Holroyd loudly directed the stretcher bearers who had paused questioningly. "There's a cart coming to pick up this dead offal."

He walked boldly ahead of the two men, examining his surroundings with quick yet measured glances. He was on a hill; the whole enormous arena was on a hill and to his right was open countryside.

To his left, many roads were visible, with a scattering of houses along some of them. The roads ran straight downward into a solid section of city beyond which was a harbor that was alive with ships. The city spread and widened and grew enormous to the left, but Holroyd gave that part of it one glance, and then pushed it out of his mind.

The harbor— By heading around the part of the city that was directly ahead—and that would take time—he could reach the enormous harbor, take possession of a ship captain's body, and—

No, wait! He felt a brief, grim impatience with himself. Damn it, he was forgetting the supernal power that his new ability of essence projection gave him.

Take a ship, indeed! Rather, capture a screer and fly to Gonwonlane in a few hours. This was no time for slow ships, or anything that would cause delay. It—

The thought ended as he saw that he and his bearers had come to a stretch of open countryside. Holroyd pointed to the shelter of a clump of trees.

"Put the thing down here," he said; and dismissed the men. He watched the two walk off up the road with the casual unconcern of the low in rank who, having been commanded to do an unexpected job, feel relief that it is over.

As soon as the men were out of sight, Holroyd had the officer follow them. All the way back to the wall and into the building he remained with the officer; and then, and not till then, fell back to the Ptath body.

Gingerly, he climbed to his feet and

started down the hillside. It was growing darker; and here, in an almost open country where there were no light sticks, that would shortly mean a great deal.

He found himself wondering with a dark interest what the officer was thinking, doing. It must be queer to have been possessed; there must be an uneasy memory of dreamlike action.

The fellow might even convince himself that the action had never occurred.

Profoundly, Holroyd hoped so.

He turned up a side road at the far end of which he could see buildings that looked as if they might belong to a farm. The faint glow in the western sky receded even farther; in half an hour intense darkness settled over the land.

One by one, Holroyd examined the outhouses. It was very dark, not a light showing from any of the buildings, but from one of the smaller buildings issued a faint stamp of movement, and the rasping of a beak opening and closing.

Holroyd manipulated the door mechanism of the screer pen and peered in. A pair of glowing eyes swayed around and stared at him.

Bold, yet cautious, Holroyd went inside. The bird offered no resistance as he saddled it and put on the bridle—obviously, it was a domesticated breed, a nonkiller.

He led it outside. It kept trying to squat down for him to mount; and when he finally permitted it to do so, it clacked softly with eagerness and made a running leap into the air the moment he was seated.

An enormous moon peered up over the eastern horizon, as the screer soared out over the ridged and restless sea of Teths.

Morning found the bird flying over a hilly, forested coast line. Unending hills and forests, or so it seemed after two hours of flight at a speed that couldn't have been less than a hundred miles an hour.

If only, Holroyd thought finally, he could find some habitation, any kind of place where he could be sure that his body would not be molested while he projected his essence to far Nushirvan.

After half an hour there was still nothing. With abrupt, sharp speculation, Holroyd eyed the back of the screer. By twining his legs in the stirrups and sprawling forward on that broad back, he ought to be as safe as he could possibly be anywhere, and—

Within a minute his body was behind him.

Through the darkness he probed with his essence, letting the vastness of the visionless night envelop him. And, after a while, he knew that this was different.

The short journeys had been simple, a straightforward movement across a space of a few yards.

This was different.

There was a distinct sensation of pushing himself forward, a *milling* of movement that in itself brought movement. It was very strange and wonderful, but after a long time there was still only the darkness.

Holroyd brought himself to a halt and poised, searching intently, waiting for an impression.

But there was nothing, no light, no sound, no pressure of any kind. The universe was made of black, empty silence. He was alone in a great void.

Hesitant, he let himself fall back into his body. Briefly, he lay quiet, then turned his head across the water toward where the isthmus of Nushirvan must be and probed again.

After a long time he began to wonder exactly how he would know when he had what he wanted. What was it Inezmia had said? That it was impossible to sense the presence of an essence when it was in a body.

But then, she hadn't been out, searching, as he was—searching, probing through impenetrable night. Perhaps, Holroyd thought finally, he was too high in the air.

He willed himself downward. It was

like falling into a well, but grimly he forced himself on. At last he felt something.

A pressure; uniform in quality it was, and becoming stronger and stronger as he lowered himself, more cautiously now, toward it.

Water?—he thought. But he couldn't be sure. Memory came for the first time of a quiet pressure of some kind during those moments when he had been heading for, or back from, the bodies he had possessed.

It hadn't seemed important at the time; and besides it was a much dimmer force. This was sharp, not altogether pleasant; the suggestion was that contact would be unwelcome, or violent in some way.

It must be water.

He was still over the sea of Teths.

Confident again, Holroyd pressed on. He must have been very near land because only a few moments passed before he *felt* a difference: Land!

There was no stopping; mountains had to be covered, hundreds of miles still intervened between himself and the great city of Khotahay. He gauged the distance, lowered himself finally, experimentally, toward where a collection of very coarse, strong pressures indicated the presence of life.

Straight toward the nearest of the pressures he flashed, and recoiled from a shock that was electric in its violence.

A woman! Careful, Holroyd thought ruefully. He approached the second pressure more gingerly, but there was no alien aura, no resistance.

He entered. The body in which he found himself was that of a small town official. Holroyd lingered barely long enough to note that the town was twenty-five miles due north of the capital.

His second body was that of a soldier walking along a market street in downtown Khotahay. Holroyd had a brief, confused sense of colorful buildings, and a veritable babble of sound; and then he had taken his bearings. His third body was in the palace of the Nushir.

It was that of one of the Nushir's secretaries, a very big, mustachioed young man, who knew that the Nushir was at that very moment in a nearby drawing room with his wife, Calya.

With his wife, Calya! Holroyd smiled grimly as he forced the young man to walk along a corridor toward the door of the room in question.

A minute later he was staring through the Nushir's eyes at a Calya, who was saying earnestly:

"The important thing is that you organize your forts and your palaces on the basis that the women are kept in separate quarters, and permitted no weapons of any kind.

"Simultaneously, send your plenipotentiaries to the great rebel Marshals Maarik, Dilin, Lagro, Sarat, Clayd and others. Offer them the return of all kidnap victims in transit through your country, explain that you dared not oppose the Zard of Accadistran knowing that she was also Ineznia, and—"

Holroyd cut in softly: "Better postpone those instructions, L'onee. I can only stay long enough to arrange a rendezvous with you, where we can meet physically."

Having spoken, he smiled—and waited.

The reply was a surprisingly long time in coming. The eyes of the plump Calya filled with tears. Her hands trembled. She leaned forward in her chair and at last she whispered:

"Ptath!"

She stood up and, with an odd, fluttering movement, came over to where he was standing and caught his arm.

"Ptath," she half sobbed. "Ptath, she's ordered the attack. Do you understand? She's ordered the attack."

"Good!" said Holroyd.

It must have sounded in the voice of the Nushir differently than he meant it. For the blond woman drew back,

a shocked look on her face. Holroyd stared at her.

"Don't be a fool!" he said grimly. "Right now we can't stop anything she does; and besides, if my analysis is correct she's playing right into our hands. We can feel sympathy for all those poor devils who are going to die, but we mustn't be rushed into precipitant action."

Swiftly, he went on: "Since the Nushir now knows our secret, it may be just as well to make clear exactly where he stands now and in the future. I hope, to begin with, he understands that a person who can plan the diabolical attack of Accadistran on Gonwonlane won't waste time or thought on the Nushir of Nushiryan.

"As for the rest, I want to make clear that he will remain alive until he dies of old age. There must be some change, however, in his government. I have in mind a limited monarchy during his lifetime. After that I don't know. I can't quite see a parliament representing eighty or eighty-five billion people. The members, no matter how many there were, would be too far removed from the individual voter.

"Regional governments seem to be in order, and I see no reason why the Nushir's descendants shouldn't play a distinguished if not a stellar role.

"He can take that or leave it. I'm sure he'll have the common sense to take it."

Holroyd paused, conscious of L'onee's tragic gaze upon him. Abrupt sharp memory came, too, that his body was out there on the back of a great bird beast; and that, if he had considered it important to get back to it before he knew about the attack, now it was absolutely urgent.

He pictured it suddenly sighted by a squadron of the flying killer screers of the Zard. And began hastily:

"The important thing is for the two of us to get together physically. And to do that I need your help in finding out for me where exactly my body is."

He explained how he had flown due south from the farmhouse from which he had stolen the screer, out over the sea of Teths, and then west along an uninhabited shore of Gonwonlane. L'onee cut him off:

"Why, of course. That's the great Ptath forest reserve east of the city of Ptath. If you follow your present course you should come soon to a bay where three rivers meet and flow into the old sea.

"Land on the south shore of the largest of the four or five big islands, and wait for me there. I shall come in the body which you first saw when I climbed the great cliff."

She smiled wanly. "It is the only lawful, free body that I possess now."

She paused; then: "Ptath," she said quietly, "you have a plan? I mean"—she made a gesture with her hand—"a real plan, one whose purpose is the frustration and overthrow of Ineznia."

"I have a theory," said Holroyd slowly, "and an unshakable faith in human nature. I have a defensive weapon that will save billions of lives. I have the ability to enter the mind of any man anywhere, including temple emperors; but if Ineznia manages to get hold of my real body before I'm ready to act, it's all over for us. That's the only answer I can give you."

He saw that the blue eyes were searching his face anxiously; but the Nushir's plump cheeks couldn't have shown much expression; she said uncertainly:

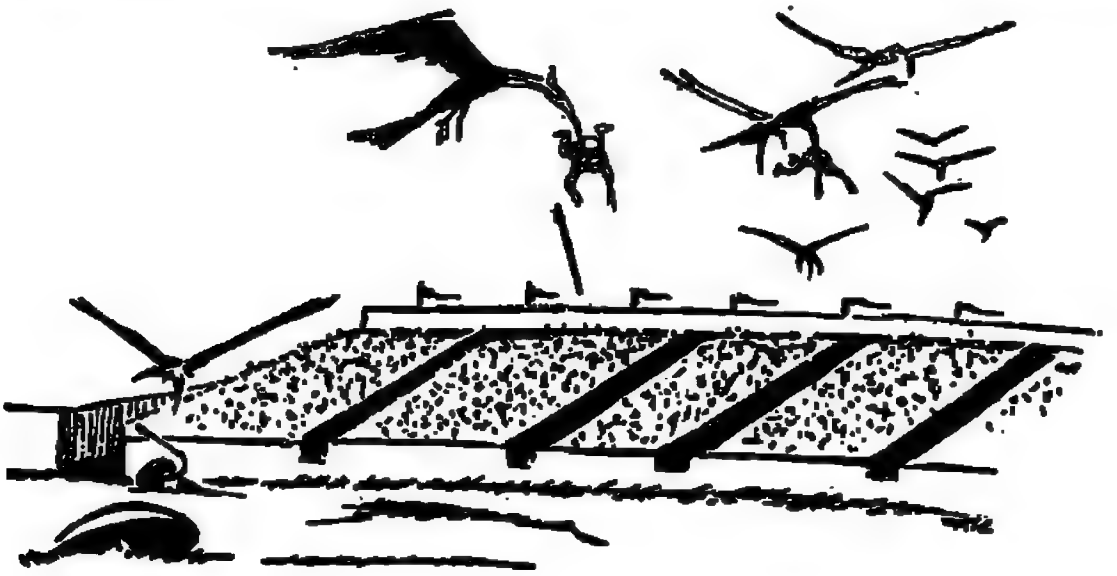
"How long will it be before you act?"

Holroyd sighed. He wished she hadn't asked the question. It was too hard to answer. His first analysis of the time that would have to elapse varied between four and five months.

In view of the fact that he had signed L'onee's death warrant, the execution to take effect in six months, part of which was already past, it *mustn't* be longer than five months. Actually, of course, it wasn't up to him, but—

Suppose five months. Even thinking about that made him quail. In five months the killer screers of the Zard would make a shambles of northern Gonwonlane. Men, women, children would die by the hundred millions. Enormous cities would fall to the invader amid scenes of horror that would be like the end of the world on a scale colossal beyond imagination.

But the possible extent of the disaster *couldn't* make any difference. Way back



In 1944 people had learned that lesson. Horror must be ignored, unflinchingly faced; and patient, grim preparation made for the hour when evil could be ended in one devastating and overwhelming blow.

With an effort Holroyd drew his mind clear of the terrible picture. He said quickly: "I'll see you at the delta and explain everything. Good-by for now."

It was only ten minutes after he returned to his own body that he saw the silver glitter of the three rivers L'onee had described.

Two days passed before L'onee joined him there.

XXI.

The island was a green, idyllic world. Its hills and glades were alive with small game; and in every patch of jungle were fruit trees with their fruit in different stages of development.

In the timeless safety of the fastness of the island, the two of them, the gaunt, tanned woman, the tall, dark-haired man, hid their bodies and waited.

Waited for the flow of power to come to Holroyd, the power that would mean that women were praying, and that victory was possible.

The days and the weeks passed.

The time was not wasted. They took turns projecting themselves into bodies in every part of the land, authoritative bodies, marshals, high zos and fezos, temple rulers and rebel commanders.

It was a slow, slogging business, like trench warfare. The continent was too vast, there were too many people with sluggish minds and a way of life rooted in conservatism.

There were too many men in remote cities who said shrewdly:

"But the goddess has sent no warning about a war with Accadistran. Where are the Imperial scroll announcements? You are not telling us the truth."

"The goddess has not warned us!

She hadn't. Rumors spread like a disease; merchants whose intercity grimb and screer transports failed to turn up uneasily closed their stores and, with a middle-class gift for self-preservation, retired to their country estates. Refugees poured south, crying terror.

But there was no word from the goddess. Somewhere, Holroyd pictured her sitting, smiling with a cool calculation, or perhaps laughing that tinkling laugh of hers.

Holroyd and L'onee were in Ptath on the night the megalopolis was victim. They stood on a hill that overlooked the sea and the city, occupying the bodies of a married couple, reading the poster Holroyd had seen earlier in the day:

> This night no light must reveal the sacred city to the flying screers of the Zard. The disaster that has befallen our land is the result of yielding to the importunities of faithless rebels in their mad will to attack Nushirvan. Have faith in the goddess!

Have faith in the goddess! Oh, Kolla! Oh, Ptath!

Holroyd said bitterly: "It's a wonder she didn't realize before that a blackout will help the invader and hinder the defense. We'll see a lot of those signs from now on, just before an attack."

L'onee drew deeper into the shadows of a doorway, but she said nothing. The darkness thickened; clouds raced through a moonless sky overhead. Below her the city sprawled in the shrouding blackness, the first vague masses of buildings quickly blurred by the intense night.

But the city was there, unseen yet palpable. Ptath, the eternal! The city of light, ancient home of the Shining One, the god king of the ages! Ptath—

That Ptath in darkness! For the first time in all its tremendous history no light showed. Ptath had merged into the night, become formless like the hills to the west.

Slowly, L'onee came out of the greater darkness of the doorway. The patches of stars that shone through openings in the clouds did queer, passionate

things to her dimly visible face. She whispered:

"Can't we do something? Must we stand by like spectators? Ptath, the nine golden cities of the west have fallen. In the east, Lira, Galee, Ristern, Tanis and the forty-three cities of the northeast gulf; and all the land of the eastern seaboard; and, on the north tip, besides glorious Kaloorna—"

"And tonight the city of Ptath itself," Holroyd said in a monotone. "No. L'onee, we can do nothing, nothing at all. Even as it is, we shall have to act with the barest minimum of the necessary power on our side, and—"

He stopped. She saw his body grow tense. His shadow shape turned and he seemed to stare in a rigid fashion toward the north.

He said: "Listen!"

L'onee heard it then, too. Like a faint moaning wind that precedes a cyclone, only not like that at all. The immeasurably terrifying sound pierced out of the black sky of the north:

"Sc-r-r-r-e-e-e-r-r! Sc-r-r-r-e-e-e-r-r! Sc-r-r-r-e-e-e-r-r!"

The first sound was like a signal. Abruptly, the alien, terrible cry of the great voracious bird filled the universe. A hundred thousand, five hundred thousand, *ten million* flying screers shrieked from the midnight heavens: the night became a shambles of madness.

Afterward, when it was all over, and they were back on the island, Holroyd raged: "I'll break her into little pieces. I'll—"

His fury quietened. Because actually he knew with a cold and deadly certainty exactly what he was going to do with Ineznia, the beast woman.

It was not all one-sided, the battle for Gonwonlane. More and more individuals and groups fought with V-pronged poles and spears and—the army was coming. Holroyd watched its ponderous progress eastward, watched some of its screer divisions as they raced ahead to protect cities and engage the invader.

Sometimes they won a battle and held for a day, for a week, before the general staff of the invader detached and concentrated masses of killer screers that overrode every opposition.

In all the history of warfare, it seemed to Holroyd, no army could possibly have suffered as much as did the Gonwonlanian. Its supply sources out, it ran out of food for days on end. Great units of men went crazy with hunger and ate their grimbs and their screers, and glared longingly at each other's flesh.

Twice, Holroyd saw men eating men.

And still there was nothing to do but wait, and *wait*, and WAIT. A dozen times they talked over their plans and their situation, the woman with the body that had been dead, and the man whose dark eyes glowed more fiercely

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each day from the mixed horror of what he was seeing, and the gathering, terrible determination in his soul.

"It's really very simple, this business of god power," Holroyd sighed one night as they sat on the green, lush grass of their island. "At a certain point you can project the essence that is you; let's call it a soul. A little further on, your whole body can be transported through space. A little after that you can take someone else along.

"The next step beyond that is the ability to move through *past* time, slowly, in the immediate past but, with the help of another pole of god power, swiftly across to parallel points of one coil of time to another, the jumps being about two hundred million years.

"Interspersed with those are other powers, for instance that journey of minds that Ineznia took me on. The amazing thing to me is that the spells of Ptath turned out to be nothing more than hypnotism, ideas planted in both your mind and Ineznia's, and which, even she, in spite of all her power, was unable to throw off."

L'onee said softly out of the darkness: "The old Ptath knew the human mind. He discovered that no brain would hold firmly more than six commands—suggestions—over a great period of time. If you will think over the six he selected you will realize how carefully he made his choice."

Holroyd nodded wearily, but said nothing more that night. It was a month later that he broke a long silence between them with:

"This old Ptath of yours, what was he like? And why did he merge with the race? From all appearances, from *all* results, it was the greatest error he ever made."

The gaunt woman shook her head, said in a strong voice:

"Look at yourself, Peter Holroyd. You are the Ptath I knew, the old Ptath, the great, earnest, conscientious Ptath. Look at yourself, I say, and you will see Ptath as he was and"—she added in a low tone—"as he will be!"

Before Holroyd could speak, she went on, more sadly:

"As for merging with the race, in one sense that does seem to have been disastrous. But he said he could feel in himself dark, alien, inhuman urges that he must purge by a return to the spring source of decency—the life force of the people.

"If his fears were justified, if he would have become more evil, then what we are seeing is not disaster but a rebirth of hope.

"I swear to you that all that Ptath desired I can now see in you, the utterly unegotistic knowledge of what is right, the determination that evil shall not flourish, the ability to adjust to and strike the enemy with her own weapons, and yet lose nothing of that will to goodness, suffer no taint, no diminishment of honest purpose."

Almost breathless, she paused; then sighed the old question between them:

"Ptath, do you feel stronger? Do you feel a *growing*?"

And as always Holroyd answered with a grim satisfaction: "Yes . . . yes, I do!"

On the one hundred twelfth night that meant something tangible. The daily test worked.

He could move his *body* through space.

And on the one hundred thirtieth morning he could take L'onee along without the use of water as a catalytic agent.

Afterward, they stood gazing at each other with eyes that were glowing yet grim.

The hour for action had come.

Like wraiths they materialized in the dungeon where L'onee's true body was chained.

It took time to transport the material they needed, the stone forge, the fuel necessary to the breaking of metal links.

Light-saws didn't work on metal.

It took time to substitute the body of a dead woman they had found who, in dim light, bore a resemblance to L'onee, and arrange the chains to look as if they still bound her.

"It isn't," L'onee said, "as if my body is desperately important with so many greater issues at stake. Besides, in the long run you could make some other body, that I possessed, into a pole of power. But I'm sure she will come here. The moment she finds out you are alive she'll come here to destroy me."

"Don't be so brave and self-sacrificing," Holroyd chided. "Your body is important; that's why we're counting on her coming here some time after our first move against her. But now let's get this paraphernalia, and our bodies, into a side room. We'll need it, and them, again when our trap has closed. Leaving our bodies around is dangerous, but—"

Next stop, he thought, the body of a high official in the palace at Gadir, Accadistran.

The man was standing gazing out of a window that overlooked the mighty capital of Accadistran, as Holroyd entered his body.

The city spread below. To Holroyd, who had seen too many cities too briefly, it was simply one more design of stone and marble.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that one of the women in the room was idly moving her fingers. Holroyd turned from the terrace and stared at her more directly.

Unmistakably now, her fingers signaled: "L'onee!"

They had agreed that both must always be present in an emergency—to make sure.

Smiling, Holroyd walked over to the woman Zard and, as she grew aware of him, plunged a knife into her heart. It was a cruel and cowardly blow, but he held his mind hard on the millions of human beings who had been torn to pieces by screers. And knew that no matter how this Ineznia-dominated body was destroyed, the only important thing was that it—was!

Beside him, a man screamed: "Deld, you murderer!"

Holroyd made no effort to defend the body he had possessed. The spear roared through him with a shattering violence. His brain vibrated with the horror of pain nerves shouting their anguish.

Stunned, he withdrew from the dying body and entered the body of the Zard's chief minister, who was in the act of hurrying over, and who was exclaiming in dismay, meaningless words.

Holroyd kept on with the exclamations for several seconds, then made his announcement:

"There will be an immediate emergency cabinet session. And, marshal, call the general staff for consultation on the necessity of withdrawing our armies from Gonwonlane. Guards, clear all nonofficials out of the room except the

Zard's brother and sister; particularly clear all women."

L'onee was the Zard's sister.

Only one woman tried to resist, and her resistance was brief; she cried out in a frenzy of defiance:

"Too late, L'onee, you're too late. You waited too long. In three more months all Gonwonlane will be occupied. And, right now, the first thing I shall do is go to the citadel palace and destroy your true body, you silly fool!"

"Woman," thought Holroyd in a terrible satisfaction, "you don't seem to realize that a man killed the Zard, and that he was not a puppet of L'onee."

Aloud, for the benefit of the courtiers, he said: "She must be hysterical!"

L'onee, in the body of the Zard's sister, came over swiftly, whispered:

"I never for an instant thought she wouldn't suspect that you were alive. It makes everything easier. She'll have to go to her body in the sealed room in the palace, then come down into the dungeon. We must get there before she does. These people can be left for the time being."

It was as swift as that. They waited in the darkness of the dungeon in their own bodies, waited for Ineznia. Abruptly, the room grew bright as the whirling shape materialized, and steadied.

And stared at them.

"Why, darling Ineznia," L'onee said, "how good of you to come here just as we desired."

The blue eyes of the golden goddess widened. She glanced at L'onee, then at Holroyd. And a strange horror crept into her face.

"And don't bother to leave your body to go for help," L'onee said more grimly. "We've got guards stationed in the upper corridors who would admit no one down here except the goddess herself, and they're all men."

She broke off: "*Quick*, Ptath, the chains! She's trying to dissolve."

It took a moment. A mad *thing* clawed at Holroyd's face; and then he had her. Round and round her writhing body he twisted the cold, enveloping chains.

There was a sickness in him as L'onee brought the blazing metal link from the forge and he hammered it into place and poured cold water on it to temper it.

It was not a good job, but no human muscles would ever break out of it.

Beside him, L'onee said: "Don't be too frightened, my dear. You're to be kept here imprisoned only until Ptath is strong enough to destroy your ability to be a pole of power. Mortal again, you will be allowed to live out your life in peace and comfort. Can you think, Ineznia, of any more fitting punishment?"

"Let's get out of here," Holroyd muttered. "I feel mentally ill."

But it was he who paused at the doorway and stared at the dull-eyed creature in the chains and said:

"You forgot one thing, Ineznia: The greater the danger, the more mindlessly people sink themselves into their religion; the more ruthlessly your soldiers attempted to make them give up their prayer sticks, the more determinedly they hid them.

"Religion, you see, is not in its roots adoration of the god or goddess involved. Religion is fear. Religion is the spark that issues forth when the thought of death or danger strikes the individual. It's personal. It grows out of darkness and uncertainty.

"In the great crisis that you so wantonly created, *what more natural than that women prayed for their soldier husbands and for their loved ones.* They will never regret it, I assure you."

Having spoken, he twisted aside and out through the door where L'onee was waiting. Together, they closed and sealed the door.

Together, they went up out of the darkness toward the light.

THE END.

The Refugee

by Jane Rice

This little tale concerns a flighty little woman, Paris under Nazi domination—and one who, even in meatless France, didn't lack for food. Also, it is <u>not</u> the story you'll think—

Illustrated by Smith

The trouble with the war, Milli Cushman thought as she stared sullenly through streaming French windows into her rain-drenched garden, was that it was so frightfully boring. There weren't any men, any more. Interesting ones, that is. Or parties. Or little pink cocktails. Or café royale. Or long-stemmed roses wrapped in crackly green wax paper. There wasn't even a decent hairdresser left.

She had been a fool to stay on. But it had seemed so exciting. Everyone listening to the radio broadcasts; the streets blossoming with uniforms; an air of feverish gaiety, heady as Moselle wine, over all the city; the conversations that made one feel so important—so in the thick of things. Would the Maginot Line hold? Would the British come? Would the Low Countries be invaded? Was it true America had issued an ultimatum? Subjects that, now, were outdated as Gatling guns.

It had been terrifically stimulating being asked for her opinion, as an American. Of course, she hadn't been home for a number of years and considered herself a true cosmopolite freed from the provincialities of her own country—but, still, it had been nice, in those first flurried jack-in-the-box days of the war to be able to discourse so intelligently on Americana. It had been such *fun*.

Momentarily, Milli's eyes sparkled—remembering. The sparkle faded and died.

Then, unexpectedly, the city had become a gaunt, gray ghost. No, not a ghost, a cat. A gaunt gray cat with it's bones showing through, as it crouched on silent haunches and stared unwinkingly before it. Like one of those cats that hung around the alley barrels of the better hotels. Or used to hang. Cooked, a cat bore a striking resemblance to a rabbit.

Overnight, a hush had fallen on everything. It was as though the city had gasped in one long, last, labored, dying breath. And had held it. One could feel it in the atmosphere. Almost like a desperate pounding.

For some inexplicable reason, it reminded her of her childhood when she had played a game as the street lights began to bloom in the gathering dusk. "If I can hold my eyes open without

blinking," she would tell herself, "until the last one is lighted, I'll get a new doll" —or a new muff—or a new hair ribbon —or whatever it might be she wanted. She could still recall that exhausted sense of time running out as the final lights went on. Most always she had won. Sometimes she hadn't, but most always she had. By the skin of her teeth.

It would be perfectly horrid, if this was one of the times when she *didn't*— win. If she had to stay on and on, trotting back and forth seeing about that idiotic visa, and saving her hairpins and soap ends and things, it was going to be too utterly stultifying. It was fortunate she had had the perception to realize, before it was too late, who were the "right people" to know. It helped. Although, in these days, the right people didn't fare much better than the "wrong" ones.

Milli used "fare" in its strictest interpretation. Often, of late, she found herself dwelling, with an aching nostalgia, on her father's butcher shop in Pittsburgh. That had been before he'd invented a new deboner, or meat cleaver, or something, and had amassed an unbelievable amount of money before he strangled to death on a loose gold filling at Tim O'Toole's clambake.

Milli's recollection of her father was but a dim blur of red face and handlebar mustaches and a deep booming voice that Milli had associated with the line "the curfew tolls the knell of parting day," which she had been forced to learn and recite at P. S. 46. Her mother she didn't remember at all, as she had been called to pastures greener than anything Pittsburgh had to offer while Milli was yet wearing swaddling clothes in a perpetual state of dampness.

However, sharpened by adversity, Milli's recollections of the butcher shop were crystal clear. The refrigerator with whole sides of beef hanging from hooks, legs of lamb like fat tallow candles, plump chickens with thick drumsticks and their heads wrapped in brown paper, slabs of pork and veal, and, at Thanksgiving and Christmas, short-legged ducks, and high-breasted turkeys, and big, yellow geese. In the showcase had been chops, and steaks, and huge roasts, and all sorts of sausages and spiced meats laid out in white enamel trays with carrot tops in between for "dressing."

It was hopeless to dream of these things, but practically impossible to stop. The main topics of conversation no longer were of "major developments" but of where one could buy an extra ration of tea of questionable ingredients, or a grisly chop of dubious origin, or a few eggs of doubtful age—if one could pay the whopping price.

Well, as long as she had liqueur-filled chocolates, and she had had enough foresight to lay in quite a supply, she could be assured of her "share." They were better than money, at the present exchange.

The clock on the mantelpiece tinkled out the hours and Milli sighed. She should bathe and dress for dinner. But what was the use of keeping up appearances when there wasn't anyone to see. And it was dreadful curling the ends of one's hair on an iron. It was tedious and it didn't really *do* a great deal for one. And it had an unmistakable scent of burning shoe leather about it. The water would be tepid, if not actually cold. The soap wouldn't lather. The bathroom would be clammy, and the dinner, when it was forthcoming, would be a ragout of God knew what, a potato that had gouged-out areas in it, a limp salad, and a compote of dried fruit. And Maria grumbled so about serving it in courses. It was positively useless to diagram for her the jumbled up indecencies of a table d'hote. Maria was almost worse than no help at all. Definitely a bourgeois.

Milli yawned and stretched her arms above her head. She arose and, going over to the windows, stood looking out.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds and angered the tiny charms that dangled from her "war bracelet." An airplane studded with rhinestones, a miniature cannon with gold-leaf wheels, a toy soldier whose diamond chip eyes winked red and blue and green in the sun as he twirled helplessly on his silver chain. Ten or twelve of these baubles hung from the bracelet and it is indicative of Milli's character that she had bought them as a gift to herself to "celebrate" the last Bastille Day.

The sun's watery radiance turned the slackening rain into shining strings of quicksilver and made a drowned seascape of the garden. The faun that once had been a fountain, gleamed wetly in the pale, unearthly light and about its feet in the cracked basin, the pelting raindrops danced and bubbled like antiphonic memories of long-gone grace notes. The flower heads were heavy with sodden, brown-edged petals and their stalks bent wearily as if cognizant of the fact that their lives were held by a tenuous thread that was soon to be snapped between the chill, biting teeth of an early frost.

Milli looked at the rain intermingled with sun and thought, the devil is beating his wife. That was what Savannah used to say, back in Pittsburgh. "The devil's beatin' his wife, sho nuff." Savannah, who made such luscious mince pies and cherry tarts, and whose baked hams were always brown and crunchy on top and stuck with cloves and criss-crossed with a knife so that the juice ran down in between the cracks and—Milli's culinary recollections suffered a complete collapse and her eyes opened very wide as they alighted on a head poking out inquisitively from the leafy seclusion of the tall hedge that bounded the garden.

Two brown hands pushed aside the foliage to allow a pair of broad, brown shoulders to come through.

Milli gave an infinitesimal gasp. A man was in her garden! A man who, judging from the visible portion of his excellent anatomy, had—literally—lost his shirt.

Instinctively, she opened her mouth to make some sort of an outcry. Whether she meant to call for aid, or to scare the interloper away, or merely to give vent to a belated exclamation of surprise, will forever be debatable for the object of her scrutiny chose that moment to turn his extraordinarily well-shaped head and his glance fixed itself on Milli. Milli's outcry died a-borning.

To begin with, it wasn't a man. It was a youth. And to end with, there was something about him, some queer, indefinable quality, that was absolutely fascinating.

He was, Milli thought, rather like a young panther, or a half-awakened leopard. He was, Milli admitted, entranced, beautiful. Perfectly *beautiful*. As an animal is beautiful and, automatically, she raised her chin so that the almost unnoticeable pouch under it became one with the line of her throat.

The youth was unabashed. If the discovery of his presence in a private garden left him in a difficult position, he effectively concealed his embarrassment. He regarded Milli steadfastly, and unwaveringly, and admiringly, and Milli, like a mesmerized bird, watched the rippling play of his muscles beneath his skin as he shoved the hedge apart still farther to obtain a better view of his erstwhile hostess.

Confusedly, Milli thought that it was lucky the windows were locked and, in the same mental breath, what a pity that they were.

The two peered at one another. Milli knew only that his hair was pasted flat to his head with the rain, and that his arms shone like sepia satin, and his eyes were tawny and filled with a flickering inward fire that made suet pudding of her knees.

For a long moment they remained so—their eyes locked. Milli's like those of an amazed china doll's; his like those of an untamed animal that was slightly underfed and resented the resulting gas-

fric disturbances. The kitchen door banged and Milli could hear Maria calling a neighborly greeting to someone, as she emptied a bucket of water in the yard. At that instant the last vestiges of sun began to sink behind the horizon, and the youth was gone. There was just the garden, and the rain, and the hedge.

Dimly, as through a fog, Milli heard Maria come in, heard the latch shoot home, the metallic clatter of the bucket as she set it down under the sink and, from somewhere outside, the long, diminishingly mournful howl of a dog.

Milli shook herself out of her trance. She brushed a hand across her eyelids as if to clear them of cobwebs and, unbolting one of the windows, went out into the garden. There was no one. Only a footprint by the hedge, a bare footprint filling in with water.

She went back into the house. Maria was there, turning on the lamps. She looked at Milli curiously and Milli realized she must be an odd sight, indeed, her hair liberally besprinkled with raindrops, her shoes muddy, her dress streaked with moisture.

"I thought I saw someone out there, just now," she explained. "Someone looking in."

"The police, probably," Maria said dourly. "The police have no notions of privacy."

"No," Milli said. "No, it wasn't the police. Didn't I hear you go out a few moments ago?"

"I wasn't looking in," Maria said in a peevish voice. "For why should I look in? I have other things to do besides looking in the windows." She drew herself up to list vocally and with accompanying gestures the numberless things she had to do.

"Did you see anyone?" Milli asked quickly.

"Old Phillipe," Maria answered. "I saw old Phillipe. On his way to the inn in the pouring rain and he with a cough since last April. When one has a cough and it is raining, one does not look in windows. Anyway, Phillipe is too old. When one is as old as Phillipe one is no longer interested. Anyhow, his son was killed at Avignon. Phillipe would not look in the windows."

"You saw no one else?"

Maria's eyes narrowed. "Madame was expecting someone, no?"

"No," Milli said. "No, I just thought . . . it was nothing."

"If madame is expecting someone, perhaps it would be well to save the beverage for later in the evening?"

"I am expecting no one."

It was, Milli thought as she let the curling iron rest in the gaseous flame, next to impossible to tell which side of the fence Maria was on. She could easily be reporting things to *both* sides. One had to be careful. So very careful.

This chap in the garden, for example. He must have escaped from somewhere. That would account for the absence of clothes. He was a refugee of some sort. And refugees of any sort were dangerous. It was best to stick to the beaten path and those who trod thereon. But he was so beautiful. Like a stripling god. No more than twenty, surely. It was delightful to see again someone as young as twenty. It was—Milli swore fluently as the iron began to smoke; she waved it in the air to cool it and, testing it gingerly with a moistened forefinger, applied it to her coiffure—it was not only delightful, it was heavenly. It was, really, rather like one of those little, long ago, pink cocktails. It *did* something for one.

A faint aroma of singeing hair made itself manifest in the damp, wallpapery smelling room.

Milli considered the refugee from every angle as she ate her solitary dinner and, afterward, as she reclined on her chaise longue idly turning the pages of a book selected at random, and while she was disrobing for bed, and even when she was giving the underpart of her chin the regulation number of backhanded slaps, a ritual that as a rule

occupied her entire attention.

Slipping into her dressing gown, she opened her window and leaned out, chin in hands, elbows on the sill. The moon rode in the sky—a hunted thing dodging behind wisps of tattered cloud, and the air was heavy and wet and redolent of dying leaves.

"The moon was a ghostly galleon," Milli quoted, feeling, somehow frail and immensely poetic. She smiled a sad, fragile smile in keeping with her mood and wondered if the refugee also was having a lonely rendezvous with the moon. Lying on his back in some hidden spot thinking, possibly, of— Her reverie was broken sharply by Maria's voice, shattering the stillness of the night. It was followed by a cascade of water.

"What on earth are you *doing!*" Milli called down exasperatedly.

"There was an animal out here," Maria yelled back, equally as exasperated. "Trampling in my mulch pile."

Milli started to say, "Don't be ridiculous, go to bed," but the sentence froze on her lips as she remembered the refugee. He had come back! Maria had thrown water on him! He had returned full of . . . of—well, hope for refuge, maybe, and Maria, the dolt, had chased him away!

"Wait," she called frenziedly into the darkness. "Wait! Oh, please, wait!"

Maria, thinking the command was for her, had waited, although the "please" had astonished her somewhat. Muttering under her breath, she had led her strangely overwrought mistress into the kitchen garden and had pointed out with pardonable pride the footprints in her mulch pile. Padded footprints. With claws.

"I saw the eyes," she said, "great, gleaming, yellow ones shining in the light when I started to pull the scullery blinds. Luckily I had a pot of water handy and I jerked open the door and—"

But her mistress wasn't listening. In truth, for one originally so upset, she had regained her composure with remarkable rapidity.

"Undoubtedly, the Trudeau's dog," she said with a total lack of interest.

"The Trudeau's dog is a Pomeranian," Maria said determinedly.

"No matter," Milli said. "Go to bed, Maria."

Maria went, mumbling to herself a querulous litany in which the word Pomeranian was, ever and anon, distinguishable—and pronounced with expletive force.

Milli awakened to find her room bright with sun, which was regrettable as it drew attention to the pattern of the rug and the well-worn condition of the curtains. It, likewise, did various things to Milli Cushman's face, which were little short of libelous. Libelous, that is, after Milli had painted herself a new one with painstaking care and the touch of an inspired, if jaded, master.

Downstairs, she found her breakfast ready and, because of its readiness, a trifle cold. She also found Maria, while not openly weeping, puffy as to eyes, and pink as to nose, and quite snuffly—a state that Milli found deplorable in servants.

A series of sharp questions brought to light the fact that old Phillipe was dead. Old Phillipe, it seemed, was not only dead but a bit mangled. To make a long story short, old Phillipe had been discovered in a condition that bordered on the skeletal. Identification had been made through particles of clothing and a pair of broken spectacles.

"You mean to say he was *eaten!*" Milli cried, which caused Maria to go off into a paroxysm of near hysterics from which Milli gathered, obscurely, that Maria blamed herself for old Phillipe's untimely demise.

By degrees, Milli drew it out of her. The footprints in the mulch pile. The kettle of water. The withdrawal of the animal to more congenial surroundings. Surroundings, doubtless, that were adjacent to the inn from whence old Phillipe,

subsequently, plodded homeward. The stealthy pad of marauding feet. The encounter. The shriek. The awful ensuing silence.

Maria's detail was so graphic that it made Milli slightly ill, although it didn't prevent her from being firm about the matter of the wolf.

"Nonsense," Milli said. "Ridiculous. A *wolf*. Preposterous."

Maria explained about the bloody footprints leading away from the scene of slaughter. Footprints much too large for a dog. *Enormous* footprints.

"No doubt it was an enormous dog," Milli said coldly. "The natural habitat of a wolf is a forest, not a paved street."

Maria opened her mouth to go even further into detail, but Milli effectively shut it for her by a reprimand that, like the porridge of the smallest of the three bears, was neither too hot nor too cold, but just right.

After all, Milli thought, old Phillipe was better off. In all probability, he hadn't suffered a great deal. Most likely he had died of shock first. One more, one less, what difference did it make. Especially when one was as old as old Phillipe. At least he had lived his life while *she*, with so much life yet to be lived, was embalmed in a wretched sort of a flypaper existence that adhered to every inch of her no matter how hard she pulled. That visa. She would have to see about it again tomorrow. And the tea supply was disastrously low. And this horrible toast made of horrible bread that was crumbly and dry and tasted of sawdust. And her last bottle of eau de cologne practically *gone*, and she *couldn't* eat this mess in front of her.

Milli got up and went into the parlor. She flung wide the French windows and petulantly surveyed the garden. She had rented the place *because* of the garden—such a lovely setting for informal teas, she had thought, and impromptu chafing-dish suppers on the flagstones with candlelight and thin, graceful-stemmed glasses. She had pictured herself in appropriate attire, cutting flowers and doing whatever it was one did with peat moss, and now look at the thing. Just *look* at it!

Milli looked at it. Her breath went out of her. She drew it in again with an unbecoming wheeze. One hand flew to her throat.

In the garden, fast asleep, curled up in a ball under the hedge, was the refugee, all dappled with shadows and naked as the day he was born.

This time, it must be noted in all fairness, Milli didn't open her chops. If an outcry was in her, it wasn't strong enough to register on her reflexes. Her eyes blinked rapidly, as they always did when Milli was thinking fast and, when she recrossed the parlor and walked down the hallway into the kitchen, her heels made hard staccato sounds on the flooring, as they always did when Milli had reached a decision.

Milli's decision made Maria as happy as could be, under the circumstances, and ten minutes later, reticule in hand, Maria departed for the domicile of her married niece's husband's aunt who was a friend of old Phillipe's widow and, consequently, would be in possession of all the particulars and would more than appreciate a helping hand and an attentive ear over the week end.

Milli turned the key behind her. Lightly, she ran to the scullery closet and took down from a nail a pair of grass-stained pants that had belonged to a gardener who had been liquidated before he had had a chance to return for his garment. Carrying the trousers over her arm, she retraced her steps to the parlor and through the double French windows.

Quiet as she was, her unbidden guest was awake as soon as her foot touched the first flagstone. He didn't move a muscle. He just opened his eyes and watched her with the easy assurance of one who knows he can leave whenever he wants to and several jumps ahead of the nearest competitor.

Milli stopped. She held out the pants.

"For you," she said. She gave them a toss. The boy, his queer, light eyes watching her every movement, made no attempt to catch them.

"Put them on," Milli said. She hesitated. "Please," she said, adding, "I am your friend."

The boy sat up. Milli hastily turned her back.

"Tell me when you get them on," she ordered.

She waited, and waited, and waited and, hearing not the faintest rustle, cautiously swiveled her head around. Once again she drew in her breath and the wheeze was very nearly an eek for, not six inches away, was her visitor—his lips pulled over his teeth in a rather disconcerting smile, his eyes like glittering nuggets of amber.

The thought raced through Milli's head that he was going to "spring" at her, a thought tinged with relief as she subconsciously noted that he *had* donned the ex-gardener's pants—tinged, too, with a thrilling sense of her own charms as the boy's eyes enumerated them one by one. She promptly elevated her chin and tried to keep her consternation from becoming obvious.

The boy laughed softly. A laugh that, somehow, was like a musical sort of a snarl. He stepped back. He bowed. Mockingly.

"What are you doing in my garden?" Milli asked, thinking it best to put him in his place, first and foremost. It wouldn't do to let him get out of hand. So soon, anyway.

"Sleeping," the boy said.

"Don't you have any place to sleep?"

"Yes. Many places. But I like this place."

"What happened to your clothes?"

The boy shrugged. He didn't answer.

"Are you a refugee?"

"In a way, I suppose, yes."

"You're hiding, aren't you?"

"Until you came out, I was simply sleeping. After I have eaten I sleep until a short while before sundown."

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"You're not hungry?" Milli elevated her eyebrows in surprise.

"Not now." The boy let his glance rove fleetingly over his hostess' neck. "I will be later."

"What do you mean 'until a short while before sundown'? Have you been traveling by night?"

"Yes."

Milli made an ineffectual motion toward the trousers. "Wasn't it . . . I mean, going around without any . . . that is, I should think— Weren't you cold?"

"No."

"It's a wonder you didn't catch pneumonia."

The boy grinned. He patted his flat stomach. "Not pneumonia," he said. "But it wasn't much better. Old and stringy and without flavor."

Milli regarded him with a puzzled frown. She didn't like being "taken in." She decided to let it go.

"My name is Milli Cushman," she said. "You are more than welcome to stay here until you are rested. You won't be bothered. I have sent my maid away."

"You're most kind," the boy said with exaggerated politeness. "Until tonight will be sufficient." If he realized that Milli was expecting him to introduce himself, he gave no sign.

After a pause, she spoke, a shade irritably. "No doubt, you *do* have a name?"

"I have lots of names. Even Latin ones."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, what is one? I can't just go about calling you 'you,' you know."

"You might call me Lupus," the boy said. "It's one of the Latin ones. It means wolf."

"Do they call you The Wolf?"

"Yes."

"How intriguing. But why?"

The boy smiled at her. "I daresay you'll find out," he said.

"You mean you're one of the ones who . . . well, like the affair of that German officer last week . . . that is to say, in a manner of speaking, you're one of those who're *still* going at it hammer and tongs?"

"Tooth and nail," the boy said.

"It seems so *silly*," Milli said. "What *good* does it do. It doesn't scare them. It just makes them angrier. And that makes it harder on *us*."

"Oh, but it *does* scare them," the boy said with an ironic lilt to his voice. "It scares them to death. Or at any rate it helps." He yawned, his tongue curling out like a cat's. And, suddenly, he was sullen. He glared at Milli with remote hostility.

"I'm sleepy," he growled. "I'm tired of talking. I want to go to sleep. Go away."

"Come inside," Milli said. "You can have Maria's bed." She gave him her most delectable glance. The one that involved the upsweeping and downsweeping of her eyelashes with the slimmest trace of a roguish quirk about the lips.

"I won't disturb you," she said. "And, besides, you might be caught if you stay in the garden. There was a man killed last night by some kind of a creature, or so they say, and Maria is sure to spread the news abroad that she threw water at something, and police just *might* investigate, and it *could* be very awkward for us both. Won't you come in, please?"

The boy looked at her in surly silence.

"Please, Lupus. For me?"

Once more he laughed softly. And this time the laugh was definitely a snarl. He reached out and pinched her. "For you, I will."

It was, Milli thought, not at all a flirtatious pinch. It was the kind of pinch her father used to give chickens to see if they were filled out in the proper places.

But Lupus wouldn't sleep in Maria's bed. He curled up on the floor of the parlor. Which, Milli thought, was just as well. It would save remaking Maria's bed so Maria wouldn't notice anything.

While her caller slept, Milli busied herself with pots and pans in the kitchen. It was tedious, but worth it. Tonight, there would be supper on the flagstones, with candles, and starlight, and all the accessories. A chance like this might not come her way for many another moon. She was resolved to make the most of it. As Savannah would have said, she was going to "do herself proud." For Lupus, the best was none too good. Not for herself, either. She nibbled a sandwich for luncheon, not wanting to spoil her appetite—not waking Lupus, for fear of spoiling his.

She got out her precious hoard of condiments. She scanned the fine printed directions on boxes. Meticulously she read the instructive leaflet inclosed in her paper bag of tanbarky appearing flour. She took off her bracelet, rolled up her sleeves, and went to work—humming happily to herself, a thing which she hadn't done for months.

She scraped, peeled, measured, sifted, chopped, stirred, beat and folded. Some fairly creditable muffins emerged from under her unaccustomed and amateurish fingers, a dessert that wasn't bad at all, and a salad that managed to give the impression of actually *being* a salad, which bordered on the miraculous.

The day slowly drew to a close and Milli was quite startled to find the hours had passed with such swiftness. So swiftly, that her initial awareness of their passing was caused by the advent of a patently ill-humored Lupus.

"Oh, dear," Milli said, "I didn't realize—is it late?"

"No," Lupus said. "It's growing early. The sun is going down."

"Are you hungry? I'm fixing some

things I think will be rather good."

"I'm ravening," Lupus said. "Let's go watch the sunset."

Milli put her hands up to her coiffure, coquettishly, allowing her sleeves to fall away from her round, white arms.

"Wait till I fix my hair. I must be a sight."

"You are," Lupus agreed, his eyes glistening. "And I won't have to wait much longer." Effortlessly he moved across and stood over Milli, devouring her with an all-encompassing gaze.

"Won't you have one of these," Milli asked hurriedly, hoping his impetuosity wouldn't brim over *too* abruptly. She shoved a box of liqueur-filled chocolates at him. "There's no such thing as a cocktail any more. Come along, we'll eat them on the sofa. It's . . it's cozier."

But Lupus wasn't interested in the chocolates. In the parlor he stretched his long, supple length on the floor and contemplated the garden, ablaze in the last rays of a dying sun.

Milli plopped down beside him and began to rub his back, gently with long, smooth, even strokes. Lupus rolled his head over in lazy, indifferent pleasure, and looked up at her with a hunger that would have been voluptuous, if it hadn't been so stark.

"Do you like that?" Milli whispered.

For a reply, Lupus opened his mouth and yawned. And into it Milli dropped a chocolate, while at the same instant she jabbed him savagely with a hairpin.

The boy sucked in his breath with a pained howl, and a full eight minutes before the sun went down, Lupus had neatly choked to death on a chocolate whose liqueur-filled insides contained a silver bullet from Milli Cushman's "war bracelet."

It had been, Milli told herself later, a near thing. And it would have been *ghastly* if it hadn't worked. But it *had* worked, tra la. Of course, it stood to reason that it *would*. After all, if, at death, a werewolf changed back into human form, why, logically, the human form would—if in close personal contact with a silver bullet *before* sundown—metamorphosis into a wolf.

It was marvelous that she'd happened to pick up "The Werewolf of Paris" yesterday—had given her an insight, so to speak, and it was *extremely* handy that she'd had all that butcher shop background.

Milli wiped her mouth daintily with a napkin. How divinely *full* she was. And with Maria gone she could have Lupus all to herself.

Down to the last, delicious morsel.

THE END.

The Patient

by E. M. Hull

The patient was different; he came to explain things to the doctor. But the doctor didn't believe—and couldn't believe after the conclusive demonstration—

Illustrated by Kramer

CANCER CURE AT LAST

London, Aug. 23, 1943—Reports reaching this capital state that a universal cancer cure has been perfected at the Midland-West Coast Hospital for Cancer Patients. Since the war, this hospital has been largely converted to military purposes, but one wing is still in charge of the brilliant cancer research scientist, Dr. Lyall Brett, who is to make a public statement shortly.

In the gathering dusk the plane was little more than a blur; and it must have been coasting, for Bill Dobbs, guard at the Midland Cancer Hospital heard no sound: Beside him, his companion stirred, then stood up.

"Blimey," his voice came to Bill. "A bloomin' parachute. Look!"

Bill strained into the dark, but after a moment he said tautly: "You're the one with the eyes, Pikes. Get the searchlight on 'em."

The beam blazed into the night, and abruptly had the white thing in its glaring embrace.

"Gor, it's empty."

"Some Nazi trick," Bill said swiftly. "Keep your eyes peeled, while I go hunt for it."

The parachute sank out of sight behind a low hill, fifty yards away. Bill raced across the moor and reached the top of the hill just as the moon came from behind clouds and bathed the shallow valley below him in a bright light.

There was nothing. Wait! He saw the dog, plainly. It ran past him at top speed, soundlessly, and was gone along a gully shielded by brush.

No parachute, no other movement. "Guess we dreamed it," Bill reported on the field phone to the sergeant, "because there ain't nothin' there but dog tracks."

It was ten minutes later that the shadow shape of dog slowed on the hard pavement of the hospital courtyard, strained its elements—and became a man, clothes and all; a big man who walked boldly into the hospital, said quietly to the girl at the information desk:

"I am Peter Grainger. May I speak to Dr. Brett's assistant, Dr. Carstairs?"

Dr. Lyall Brett looked up wearily as Dr. Carstairs opened the door of his office and came in.

"Lyall," Carstairs breathed. "It's happened. He's here."

Brett stared at him wanly. "Who's

here? Say, I thought you were in bed."

"Heading that way, but I wouldn't have missed this for a million-dollar gift to Cancer Research. I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight! Lyall, you've go to talk to him now, this minute."

"Harry," said Brett, "what are you talking about? Who's here?"

"I've just admitted Peter Grainger as a patient."

"I'm still blind," Brett began, then he stopped: "Another patient? Are you crazy? We haven't room for a sardine, let alone another patient. Where did you put him?"

"I doubled up the day and night head nurses. If looks could kill, I'd be dead now. But I tell you, Brett, we couldn't miss this man."

"Remember my telling you of a patient who came to Carl Hamber's New York Cancer Institute last year; the fellow who'd been to every cancer institute as well as to every quack in the world? He's the perpetual cancer patient. He has an operation practically every year. They've cut cancer out of his throat, his chest, his head—and he's still alive. He's *the* cancer patient, known all over the world. If you can cure him—"

Brett was frowning. "Come to think of it, I remember hearing of him. Do you mean to tell me, Hamber couldn't do anything with him? From what you told me of Hamber's process, he and I were on the same track, though he was first, and if he hadn't been killed so tragically—"

"There you have the answer to your question, Lyall," Carstairs spoke quietly. "The explosion that killed him and wrecked the laboratory took place on the night that Grainger arrived there; the same night that I left New York to come to work with you. I met Grainger at the time, and as a matter of fact, he asked for me when he arrived tonight.

"He probably knows more about cancer and the men working on it than any person now alive." He laughed grimly, finished curtly: "After all, he's got a bigger stake in finding the cure even than you. Shall I send him in?"

Brett hesitated, said finally: "I suppose so. But you get to bed."

The man was different, utterly different from what Brett expected. He loomed in the doorway. In the dim light of the desk lamp, he glowed with vitality; he said in a voice that was alive with vibrant power:

"Dr. Brett, is your system based on diet?"

"It is."

"Ah! A combination of vitamins. May I ask what proportions of A, B, C and D you use? What is your key number?"

The curious feeling came to Brett that it was he who was being interviewed. He felt no annoyance, but he had met patients before who talked in just such a glib manner, if not so forcefully. He smiled a tight, tired little smile, and said;

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Grainger? I shall be pleased to give you a brief explanation of my system."

He watched in a developing wonder, as the man came forward with a catlike grace. Abruptly, in spite of weariness, Brett was conscious of admiration; he said:

"Mr. Grainger, you astound me. Most cancer patients droop with pain; their spirit is worn to tatters—"

"I have other surprises for you," said the man coolly; and Brett looked at him sharply, conscious of hidden meaning. The impression faded, and Brett began slowly:

"I decided shortly after I left medical college that I wanted the broadest possible base for attacking the problem of cancer. Let other men, I thought, build expensive apparatus to cure people in whom cancer had become too far advanced for surgery.

"What I wanted was something that would check the disease at any stage, and about which any doctor, whatever his

knowledge, could say: 'Now you just do so and so, and you'll be all right in no time.'"

"What do all humans do that has a vital effect on their health?—that was the question I asked myself. And the answer, of course, was as simple and straightforward as the question: They eat. Tons and tons of food. The entire world is geared to satisfy that basic need."

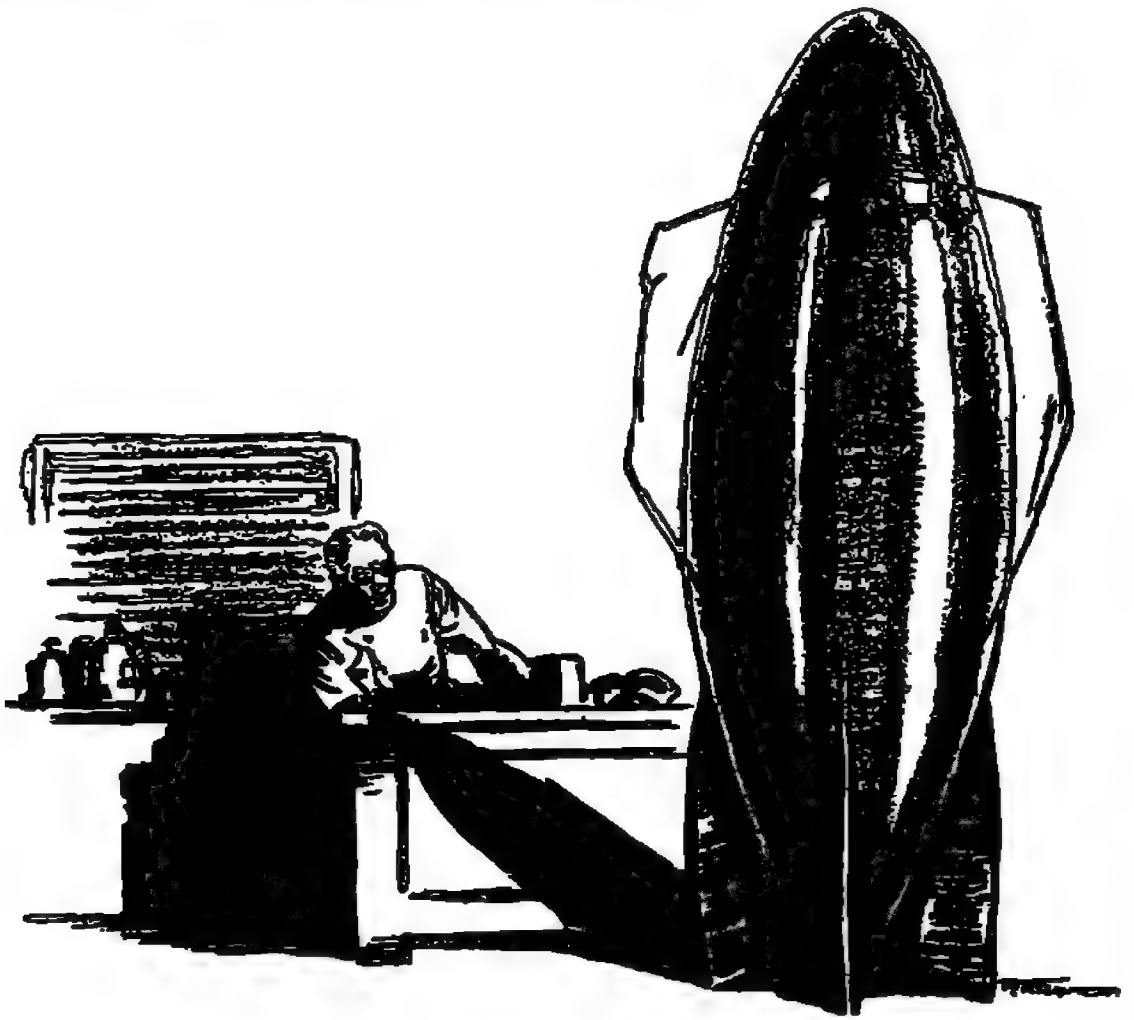
In his gathering excitement, he stood up, stared down at Grainger. "What was needed was a rough and ready system of measuring the daily vitamin ration that anybody, anywhere could follow, something that would destroy the cancer potentiality of every cell in the body. Cancer, as you know, is simply cell growth run wild and—"

"I see," came the steel-toned interruption, "that you are on the right track. Accordingly, you must die, you, and all those who know your secret."

"Eh?" said Brett. And then, as the man's words penetrated, he stood and stared.

There was silence. Very carefully, Brett went to his chair, and sank into it. He was not afraid, but he felt oppressed, hopeless.

Brett sighed, and said: "Why do you want to kill me? On the entire earth, I am probably the only man who can make you well."



The stranger shook his head. In the half-light, his eyes gleamed: "I am not a madman, Dr. Brett; and unfortunately for you, the very extent of your success makes it necessary for me to kill you. Let me ask you a question: Can you imagine a perfect physical being?"

It struck Brett sharply that if only he could keep the fellow talking— He said cautiously: "Universal adaptation would be a required ability for such a being. That meant . . . amorphism . . . changing shape at will . . . which would require radical cell and tissue growth like—"

He stopped, his eyes wide. Before he could speak, the man, Grainger, said softly: "Yes, Dr. Brett, like cancer; and you would destroy the free-growth potentiality of the cell, *man's hope for biological perfection, for adaptive power so complete that he can swim and fly, and live in airless space, live anywhere, under any conditions.*"

Brett gasped: "You're crazy, man! It's impossible! Don't you see what's happened to you? For years you've been under the threat of death by cancer. And it's become an obsession in reserve. You—"

The stranger's voice, strong and resonant, cut him off: "Man is on the verge of his tremendous destiny. Never has there been so much cancer in the world. The amazing thing is that no one suspected, for of all the diseases—I do not include organic weaknesses—it is the only one not of germ.

"You are beginning to understand why you must be destroyed. Must! There is no promise you could make which would satisfy me. For a dozen reasons, you will be opposed to amorphism. The very idea is hideous, it is against religion—so you will think. Or you will decide that this meeting was the dreams of a tired brain. Or that any promise you make under coercion is not binding.

"You must die as Hamber died and others before him, because you did not confine your research to alleviation of pain, to the development of apparatus which will destroy specific cases of cancer. War has made it difficult for me to keep track of research. At one time I used to fly with my own wings, but that is too slow in a world of delayed news. Today, to reach you, I took the swiftest plane ever built, transformed briefly into a parachute, then into a dog. It took me only three hours to reach here from—where I was.

"But you can see now why I am on Earth—to protect the human race from one phase of its scientific genius."

"*On* Earth?" Brett croaked.

"Do not fear, Dr. Brett; you have an immortal soul. You will live again, your great, questing spirit undimmed; only—soon—your body, too, will be everlasting."

Brett was thinking numbly: There were buzzer buttons on his desk. But they would only bring nurses. And he couldn't drag women into this—

His mind wrenched from its hopeless thought. For the man was changing. *Changing*. His face transforming, shining. Abruptly, there was a glistening steelike bomb standing upended on the floor.

"Beware," Brett was thinking piercingly, "doctors, beware this patient, beware—"

The world ended in a shattering violence of explosion.

It took an hour for the dynamic cells of the man, in their blind will to cohesion, to come together. Slowly, in the darkness, Peter Grainger took form. He stood for a while, staring at the wreckage of the hospital wing; then he turned off into the night.

Next morning, the following communique was issued by the Ministry of Home Security:

—alight enemy air activity over the west coast. A hospital was damaged with some casualties among patients and personnel, including two doctors killed. No military damage.

THE END.

Fido

by Chester S. Geier

Fido was a queer sort of pet—he was invisible, for one thing. And he picked his own masters, and did their bidding faithfully. But somehow he couldn't keep masters long. They kept dying—

Illustrated by Williams

The cabbie pulled to a stop in front of the apartment hotel and swung around in his seat. "Your number, mister," he announced wearily.

Nick Bevins, his hands plunged deep into the trouser pockets of his rumpled tuxedo, looked up with a start. "Huh?" he muttered. "Oh, yeah." He glanced at the meter, then pulled out a wallet from which he selected two bills. He handed these to the cabbie without waiting for change and climbed from the cab. It grumbled into motion and shot away.

Alone at the curb, Bevins absently rubbed the palm of his right hand over the back of his left. He looked around him slowly, his large, slightly protruding brown eyes glistening in apprehensive expectancy.

It was early morning. A hint of dawn showed on the horizon at the eastern end of the street. The lamps burned with a pale luminescence in the fog which had crept in from Lake Michigan little more than three blocks distant. Darkness still pressed heavily upon this portion of Chicago's north side, and the tall apartment buildings loomed cliffike in the gloom, unlighted and featureless.

Bevin's gaze had probed both sides of the street, from one end to the other. It seemed unfamiliar in the fog, almost eerie. But he saw nothing move, nor was there any sound. He had a growing sense of relief. Almost he was becoming convinced that his conviction of the past week that someone followed him was due merely to nerves.

A cold, thin breeze came in suddenly from the lake. Bevins shivered and drew the open ends of his overcoat about his short, slender figure. He felt an abrupt burst of impatience. What was he waiting for? Was he actually hoping to see something? He glanced at the glass and metal door that led into his apartment hotel, and in his mind there began the impulse which would set his legs into motion.

And then he froze into rigidity. For a moment his eyes had glanced from the door before him, and in the cone of light from the street lamp five yards distant, he thought he had seen something move. But when his frightened eyes darted to cover the spot, there was nothing to be seen except curling wisps of fog vapor. But he was certain that someone—or something—had stood for

an instant in the circle of illumination.

Bevins felt a rush of terror. He was positive his experience wasn't due to nerves or imagination. Someone *was* following him. Or something. Something that was as silent as the approach of death itself, that moved with such rapidity that it left only a flicker of motion in a turning eye.

Bevins' mind completed its previous impulse and he rushed madly through the door. The night clerk, reading a magazine in the light above the telephone switchboard, looked up in alarm. "Oh! Morning, Mr. Bevins."

Bevins gave him a short nod and let himself into the self-operating elevator. He punched the button for his floor and frowned in frightened thought while he nibbled the tip of his thin blond mustache. He wondered if Grange had found out that there was something wrong going on at the club and was having him followed. But Bevins shook his head. Big Steve Grange didn't work that way. He wouldn't have him followed. He, Bevins, would just quietly disappear one dark night.

Bevins wondered how soon he could get the club books straightened out before Grange decided to look them over. He'd made a profit on International Life, but that would all have to go back into the club's funds. He'd lost heavily on his Consolidated stock, however, and that made a balance of three hundred dollars short which would have to be covered up somehow.

Bevins shuddered. He knew now that he had been a fool to try to make money that way. Grange would have him killed if he learned that he, Bevins, had been speculating with club funds.

Bevins felt appalled at the thought of how close he was to disaster. Big Steve Grange was cruel, ruthless, utterly without mercy or compunction. He never forgave a mistake, nor did he ever pardon a crime. He was one of the last of the old-time racketeers, though still quite powerful. His practices had remained much the same through the years, but his methods had changed to conform with the times. He owned more than a dozen profitable enterprises of which the Variety Club—which Bevins managed—was only one.

Bevins frowned as he sought to recall what Grange had mentioned about the books that night. Grange had been at the club, with the latest of his mammas, and Bevins had sat at his table for a while. But he'd had too many drinks and Vic Hendron's orchestra was swinging into a fast number, and he just couldn't remember precisely what Grange had said. His mind retained only a reference to the books.

Suddenly Bevins realized that the elevator had stopped at his floor. He pulled open the door and let himself out into the hall.

He was fishing for his key when his eyes caught an abrupt flicker of motion at the further end of the hall. Ice water filled his veins and he gazed a long, dreading moment at the spot. But nothing else happened, and the hall was still. Bevins felt haunted. He knew now that something followed him. But he wished desperately that he knew just what it was. There would be a shred of comfort in the mere fact of knowing.

Bevins let himself quickly into his room and locked the door. He wondered suddenly if he really wanted to know. Something that moved so fast and was so silent just couldn't be human. It had trailed him from the club, though he had heard no following car. How had it done so? And—Bevins gasped in dismay—how had it gotten into the building?

But whatever it was, whatever its uncanny abilities, it at least wasn't dangerous. He had been followed a whole week now and nothing had happened to him. The thing just followed him around, and when he noticed, it was gone.

Bevins felt a small return of his confidence. He found himself wishing again that he knew what it was. He

pulled off his hat and coat, ran his fingers through his thinning blond hair and began to remove his tuxedo.

An unframed publicity photo of Patsy Clark atop the bookcase caught his eye. His sallow face became bitter and sullen. Patsy was a permanent entertainer at the club, and her voice was as lovely as she was herself. She sang popular numbers with a vivacity and charm that never failed to bring down the house. The picture wasn't in colors, but Bevins knew that her long hair was light brown, glinting with golden lights. Her eyes were a sparkling hazel and her skin was white and clear. She was small but delightfully rounded, with a hint of plumpness at arms and hips.

Though Bevins was uncertain as to what Grange had said about the books, he remembered the exact words Patsy had used in rejecting his proposal that night. That was before he had started drinking. It was, in fact, the thing that had gotten him started.

Patsy had said, "I'm awfully sorry, Nick, but I just couldn't marry you. You've been swell to me and I'm grateful. But, gosh, Nick, if I haven't got anything for you, I just haven't. You understand, don't you?"

Bevins recalled that he had nodded, but he hadn't understood. That was gratitude, he thought blackly now. Why, he'd taken Patsy in at the club when she was just a little nobody. He'd given her the chance to become what she was now. Why didn't women look into their heads instead of their hearts in matters of this sort?

Of course, Bevins forgot the little wave of desire which had swept over him when he had first seen Patsy, the day she had appeared at the club looking for a job. She'd been very pretty with her plain hair-do and her simple dress. He'd wanted her as he had never wanted any woman before, and he'd hired her on the strength of that alone. Patsy's own silver voice and wonderful little personality had taken care of the rest, but Bevins chose to forget that.

The thing which Bevins found most humiliating about the situation was that he was really willing to marry Patsy, though there were any number of other women he could have without legal entanglements. There were a lot of cheap entertainers who would be willing to be nice to him for the chance to appear at the club. But he wanted Patsy.

Scowling, Bevins went into the bedroom and climbed into a pair of green silk pajamas. It was that band leader, Vic Hendron, Bevins thought furiously. He should never have signed up Hendron's orchestra for that three-week engagement. Hendron had been playing at the club for over a week now, and Bevins had often seen him and Patsy standing close together, talking and laughing as if nothing else in the world mattered but what they had to say to each other. Bevins was vain about his dapper sleekness, but there were times when he did envy Hendron for his height and handsome, vigorous youth.

Bevins dropped onto the bed and pulled the covers about him. He was preparing to turn out the light on the night table beside him when something moved into sight in the bedroom doorway. Bevins looked. His mouth dropped open as though it had relinquished relationship with the thin blond mustache above it. His brown eyes, usually slightly popped, seemed ready to jump from their sockets. A chilling tide of horror such as he had never known overwhelmed him.

A thing squatted in the doorway. It looked like an insane mixture of St. Bernard dog and chimpanzee, but neither of these two familiar animals possess long, silver hair, horns, claws, and inch-long fangs. The thing did not move, neither did it make a sound. It merely looked at Bevins with weird yellow eyes that had neither iris nor pupil.

Bevins felt a wild need for a scream, but he was incapable of accomplishing

one. He just had time to remember his wish that he could see the thing which had been following him. Then he quietly fainted.

When Bevins awoke it was past noon. He lay still for a moment, looking around the bedroom, dark with its shades still drawn. He was relieved when he found nothing. His courage returned. He climbed out of bed, stretched, then pulled up the shades.

A sudden thought made him pause in the act of pulling off his pajama top. Maybe the thing was still in the apartment, in another room. He looked into the living room—and there it was.

The thing lay curled up in an armchair for all the world like a nightmarish, overgrown dog. It turned vacant yellow eyes to Bevins and just looked.

Bevins managed a thin bleat this time. He clung weakly to the door frame, his muscles bunches of quivering horror. His frightened mind sought desperately for some answer as to what he should do. Abruptly, he remembered that the thing had appeared to him only because he had wanted it to. Perhaps if he wanted it to go away—

"G-get out!" Bevins quavered.

It worked. The thing paled into colorlessness, became transparent. The outlines of its form thinned like smoke in a breeze and it was gone.

Bevins released his breath in a gasping sigh. He rubbed the palm of his right hand over the back of his left.

He wondered if he had gone mad. He was a little surprised to find himself thinking quite clearly and rationally about it, and finally he decided that wasn't quite the answer. Neither was nerves or hallucinations. What he had experienced was too real and crystal-clear for that. He thought of liquor, but he was careful enough of his job never to get himself actually drunk. A heavy drinker *might* see such an animal, but it would take a lot of whiskey to do it.

Bevins came to the conclusion that there was nothing really wrong with himself. It was the thing. What it was and why it had taken to following him, he couldn't guess. He tried it a moment, but his mind began to wander into realms so dark, dank, and hideous that he was afraid to continue. But the fact remained that it existed. It *had* appeared when he wanted to see it, and it *had* gone away when he told it to do so. Whatever the thing was, then, wherever it had come from, it possessed a quite definitely tractable nature.

Bevins' mind reeled beneath the sudden blow of the realization that the thing had been in the apartment with him all morning. And nothing had happened! He was still safe and sound.

He shook his head in bewilderment. It seemed that he had acquired a mighty strange pet! Not only was it harmless, but obedient as well.

Though still a little worried about the future, Bevins nevertheless felt a return of his courage and confidence. He was not very much astonished to find that he had accepted the thing, frightful appearance, uncanny powers, and all.

Bevins dressed and groomed himself with his usual painstaking care, had breakfast downtown, and got to work in his office at the club. He attended to various routine matters first. Then, his forehead wrinkled in anxiety and concentration, he got down to fixing the books. It required a lot of imagination and manipulation of expenses, but at last he was satisfied with his efforts. The books wouldn't stand up under expert scrutiny, but they would pass Grange's none-too-educated gaze. Bevins felt safe enough.

Affairs at the club that night moved with the rapidity and hectic gaiety with which they always did. The bar was covered in a haze of cigarette smoke, the closely grouped tables were noisy with talk and laughter, and the dance floor was crowded. The floor show went smoothly, and Vic Hendron's

orchestra played well. Patsy was lovely in a patriotic red, white, and blue gown.

Later, Bevins saw the band leader and the girl seated close together at the bar. He watched in jealous anger, wondering how they found so much to say to each other. And as he watched he saw them touch lips in a swift kiss.

When he returned home again that evening, he was more than a little drunk. He felt furious and reckless. This latter to the extent where he suddenly decided to summon the thing.

"Hey!" he called. "Hey, wherever you are! Come here."

The air seemed to thicken before his uncertain eyes. It formed an outline, then a darkening transparency, and finally the thing squatted before him.

Bevins sobered a little, just from looking at it. He felt a sudden stab of dismay at his temerity.

"Scram!" he ordered quickly.

The thing went unhesitatingly. Bevins smiled slowly, and his narrow chest expanded with a sudden feeling of power.

Bevins summoned the thing often in the days that followed. He had lost all fear of it and had accepted the fact of its existence to the extent where he no longer wondered what it was or where it had come from. That it responded docilely to his slightest whim was enough for him. He even spoke to it when he had too much to drink at the club, and it seemed to listen to his monologues of jealousy and frustration with a stolid kind of understanding. It was from this sole quality that Bevins developed a queer affection for the thing. He named it Fido.

Fido was a silent and unresponsive pet. It appeared and vanished in its mysterious way obediently enough at Bevins' commands. But otherwise it squatted in its habitual position on the floor, looking up at him with vacant yellow eyes.

Grange appeared unexpectedly at the club one afternoon with Toby Baugh, his strong-arm man, and demanded to see the books. Bevins nervously produced them and then watched apprehensively while Grange's cold blue eyes ran over the columns of figures.

Finally Grange grunted and looked up. He eyed Bevins frigidly.

"Nick, have you been fooling around with these books?" he asked flatly.

Bevins gulped his voice into action. "Why, no, Mr. Grange," he lied desperately. "What gave you the idea—"

"I'll tell you what gave me the idea!" Grange snapped. "I stopped in to see my stockbrokers yesterday, and they told me they heard that you've been speculating on the market. You evidently tried to keep it quiet, but it leaked out. Now listen, Nick, where did you get the money?"

Bevins rubbed the palm of his right hand over the back of his left. He stammered, "I . . . I had some money saved up, Mr. Grange."

"Don't give me any of that, Nick!" Grange snarled with an impatient gesture. "I know you well enough to know that you never save a cent. You bought up several thousand dollars' worth of International Life and Consolidated stock a short time ago. That's pretty big money, and you could never have afforded it yourself." Grange paused while his blue eyes, cold and grim as glacial ice, probed into Bevins' shifting brown ones.

"Nick, where did you get the money?"

Bevins' eyes darted about the office in panic. He was cold with the chill of approaching doom. He noticed Toby Baugh sidling toward him, an eager grin on his thick lips. Toby Baugh was big and powerful, with the long, swinging arms of a gorilla.

"Where did you get the money, Nick?" Grange repeated.

"I . . . I borrowed it. Honest, Mr. Grange."

"Borrowed it, eh? Where, Nick? From club funds?"

"No, Mr. Grange! You know I wouldn't do that."

"No? I know you pretty well, Nick. Now listen. I can't find anything wrong with these books, but I'm pretty certain you've been using club money in your speculating deals. I could call in an accountant to check things over, but that would waste time. Tell me—have you been using club money?"

"No, Mr. Grange," Bevins cried thinly. "Honest—"

Grange's lips pressed together in a thin line. He raised a beckoning arm. "Toby."

Baugh's little eyes lighted and his heavy features spread into a leer. He crossed the remaining distance toward Bevins, his long arms swinging up.

Bevins drew back in terror. He knew what Baugh could do to him. He thought desperately of the gun in the desk drawer, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to reach it in time. And then he thought of something else. Fido. He thought of the thing in the same way that a man thinks of a faithful, protecting dog.

As Baugh's powerful right hand shot out to grasp him, Bevins yelped, *"Fido!"* And then Baugh had him. The tough's hairy left hand smacked stingingly across his cheek.

"Tell the boss what he wants to know, Nick."

Bevins' eyes strained for the thickening of the air which would herald Fido's appearance. At last it came. And it seemed to Bevins that it came a little faster than usual.

Baugh's left hand raised again. But it never landed. Silent as death, Fido leaped upon him.

Grange emitted a hoarse cry of surprise and shock. Baugh gasped, "What the—"

But Bevins watched with vengeful eagerness. Strangely, Baugh evinced no effect of weight or overbalance. The

tough was horribly conscious of the weird form clinging to him, but he did not seem to feel it. It was as though Fido were somehow insubstantial. And to Bevins, Fido appeared queerly to *sink* into Baugh.

Gurgling in fear, the tough flailed his long arms in a frenzied effort to dislodge the thing which gripped him. But sound and motion went suddenly out of him, like air from a pricked balloon. His eyes glazed and he slumped slowly to the floor. Fido stepped away from him and settled into its usual squatting position.

Bevins stared at Fido in surprised discovery. The thing had—*changed*. It looked slightly larger now, and its silvery hair was tinged with blue.

"What is that thing?" Grange whispered. "What did it do to Toby?"

Bevins was breathing fast, and his protruding eyes glittered with exultation. He had learned something tremendously important. Fido was still obedient—but harmless only if he wished it so. It could also be used as a weapon for defense, or—and most significant—as a tool for murder.

In reckless disregard of Fido squatting close by, Grange knelt to examine the prone form of Baugh. Then he looked up, his blue eyes wide with dismay and appall. He seemed suddenly old.

"Toby's dead," Grange husked. "He . . . he's cold as ice."

Bevins said nothing. He watched the other with a kind of vindictive speculation.

Grange stood up slowly. He flicked a fearful glance at Fido. "Nick, what *is* that thing?"

Bevins shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know, Mr. Grange. But I find Fido a quite useful pet."

"We've got to call a doctor," Grange said suddenly.

Bevins stepped over to the desk, took out his revolver from the drawer and slid this into a pocket. "I'll do all the talking, Mr. Grange. Understand?"

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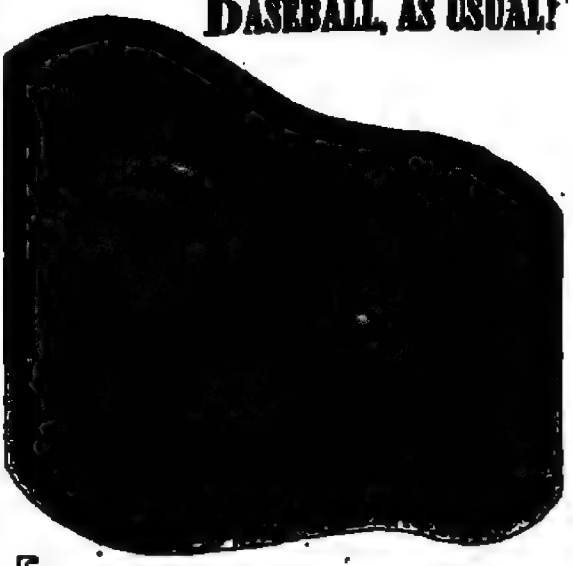

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Grange nodded slowly. His blue eyes went cold, but the next instant he veiled his gaze.

"Scram, Fido," Bevins ordered.

Fido vanished silently, and even more rapidly than he had appeared. It seemed to Bevins that the thing had not only changed, but had taken on new energy as well.

Bevins turned to the telephone and put in a call for a doctor in a nearby building. The doctor appeared shortly. He was elderly, bald, and wore a harried expression.

"We found the body there on the floor when we came in this afternoon," Bevins explained smoothly. "He seems to have been dead for some time."

The doctor examined Baugh with birdlike rapidity. Then he stood up, brushing at his hands. "Heart failure," he announced. He seemed vaguely puzzled, but wrote out the death certificate unhesitatingly enough. Later, a mortician's crew came in with their wicker coffin, and Baugh's remains were carted out.

Grange turned toward the door. "I haven't finished this, Nick," he reminded grimly.

Bevins held up a hand. "Neither have I, Mr. Grange. Sit down, please."

"What do you want?"

"This," Bevins began triumphantly. "You're going to call your lawyer here to the office immediately. When he arrives, you're going to sign the club over to my name."

"I will not!" Grange snapped.

"Fido!" Bevins called softly.

Grange reached for the telephone.

Bevins returned to his apartment that night, drunk with liquor and triumph. He was now the owner of the Variety Club. The crisp rustle of the papers in his coat pocket attested that the transfer was outwardly legal and proper enough. But clear even in his whiskey-sodden mind remained the picture of Grange's face, white with impotent fury. Bevins wasn't too drunk to remember that there was something he had to do about that.

He rubbed the palm of his right hand over the back of his left. "Fido!" he called.

"We aren't finished with Grange," Bevins told the thing. "Not by a long shot, Fido, old boy. Think he's just going to shrug off the transferal and forget about it? I'll say he won't."

"Grange is going to do his damnedest to have me bumped off now. A shot in the back, or a smack over the head and then the river. But we won't wait for that, will we, Fido, old boy? We'll beat him to the punch, won't we?

"Now look, Fido, this is what you're going to do." Grange lived in a two-story house in Evanston. Bevins had been there several times, both on business and to parties. Now he gave the thing explicit directions for reaching the house.

"Sick him, Fido!" Bevins finished.

A satisfied smirk spread over Bevins' face the next afternoon when he read in the papers that Big Steve Grange had died the previous night of a strange heart attack.

One of the first things Bevins did in his new independence was to vacate his quarters at the apartment hotel. He moved into a large hotel in the Loop where he now was less than two blocks from the club. The rooms were large and luxurious. Furniture and decorations were all ultra modernistic, glittering in their severely simple perfection.

What pleased Bevins the most about the place was the large, full-length mirror in the hall. This faced the entrance to the rooms, and Bevins never failed to examine himself in it, both when he came in and when he went out.

He adjusted matters at the club entirely to his own liking now, as befitted his role of owner. Then he settled down to enjoy his new life. The only thorn in the side of his contentment was Patsy.

There was something, however, which gave Bevins a little hope. Vic Hendron's run was due to end in a few days, and he felt, without the handsome band leader in the way, that the girl would gradually change her mind about him.

One night, shortly before show time, he passed Patsy's dressing room to see the girl standing in the open doorway, looking down at her nervously twisting hands. "What's the matter, honey?" he asked. "Anything I can do?"

Patsy looked up at him with troubled hazel eyes. "Nick, I'd like to talk to you."

"Certainly, honey," Bevins replied promptly. He knew, since he intended to ingratiate himself into her affections, that there was no better time to start than the present. He followed Patsy into the dressing room.

The girl turned to face him. "Nick," she began, "I hate to do this, but I'm leaving the club."

Bevins' world dropped out from under his feet. He was deluged in a sudden downpour of shock and dismay. "Patsy!" he gasped. "You can't do this!"

"I'm sorry, Nick. You see, I'm going to marry Vic next week, and then I'm going to sing with his band."

"Patsy—you can't! Listen, kid, I'm nuts about you—wild about you! I'd die without you! Why, Patsy—"

The girl made a weary gesture. "Oh, Nick! We've been through that before. Please try to be sensible. I told you where you stood and, gosh, I just can't change to make you happy. I love Vic."

Bevins stared at her in silent bitterness. The perfume of her was in his nostrils, and her loveliness had the aching poignancy of something soon to be lost. He looked at her small face, twisted in an expression of pained sorrow. He saw again her clear skin and the golden lights in her soft hair.

Abruptly, he was violently, furiously angry. He grasped her arms in a frenzied clutch.

"Think you're going to run out on me, huh?" he shouted. "I'm not good enough for you, eh? Why, I took you in here when you didn't have two cents to your name. I made a headliner out of you, and now—"

Bevins felt himself suddenly grasped from behind and whirled about. Something smashed sickeningly into his chin and he went staggering backward to

crash into a dressing screen. He found himself looking up into Vic Hendron's indignant white face.

"You skunk!" the band leader snapped. "Get up and I'll give you another sample of what happens to the guy who tries to manhandle Patsy."

The girl grasped his arm. "No, Vic," she interceded. "Let him alone."

Hendron relaxed a trifle. "I was coming to see you, Patsy," he explained. "I heard this guy blowing his top off and came in here to see him mauling you. If he hurt you—"

The girl shook her head quickly. "No, Vic, please. It's all right now."

"O. K., if you say so." Hendron looked at Bevins and jerked a thumb toward the door. "Get out, mug," he growled. "And don't let me catch you near Patsy again."

Bevins climbed shakily to his feet. At the door he darted Hendron a final glance of malevolent fury. Then he went out, slowly rubbing the palm of his right hand over the back of his left.

That night Bevins got himself stinkingly, loathsomely drunk. But the plan which he had formed floated like a raft above the liquor with which he flooded himself. No amount of drinking could dim it from his mind. He knew just what he was going to do. When he arrived at his rooms he was going to summon Fido. And then—

Bevins chuckled evilly. Fido would take care of Hendron.

Bevins staggered to his hotel. He took the elevator to his floor, curtly refusing the assistance of several grinning bellboys. He grunted knowingly to himself. He wasn't as drunk as they thought. He knew just where he was going and just what he was going to do.

Bevins had some difficulty in getting his key into the lock. But finally he managed it and the door swung open.

The hall was unlit, but illumination from the outer passage flooded in. Bevins started to enter the hall. But at the threshold he stopped rigidly, a thrill of fear racing through him.

There in the hall was another man! Instantly Bevins knew who it must be. Hendron!

"Fido!" Bevins cried. "Get him!"

And then, sobered a little by his fright, he remembered the full-length mirror in the hall. He remembered, too, that Fido implicitly obeyed his every command. The thing wouldn't be fooled by the mirror as he had been. But all this came too late.

Full of life energy from Baugh and Grange, Fido appeared in a flash. And before Bevins could shriek out the counter order which would mean continued existence, the thing was upon him.

Later, Fido went out to the street by a means which only it knew. It squatted invisibly on the sidewalk, its mind questing for the thoughts which would once more give it direction and impulse. Fido had no mind of its own. It only sensed in a dim way that it now needed a new master.

The hour was late and the people along the street were few. But Fido waited with stolid patience.

A man swung past on uncertain legs, his thoughts inchoate in a fog of liquor. Then a scrub woman plodded by, her dull mind heavy with weariness. There were others, but Fido remained motionless like a machine that can be started only by the turning of a certain switch.

At last that for which Fido was waiting came. A man strode slowly past, his thoughts volcanic and desperate.

"I won't be able to pay Farris blackmail much longer," the man was thinking. "And then the rat'll tell Ann about me and Virginia. Ann'll tell her old man, and that'll mean my job. Then Virginia—"

Fido responded to the thoughts mechanically. This man had the qualities which gave it life and sustenance. The thing got up and followed the man.

Fido had found a new master.

THE END.

Change

by Roby Wentz

The things on the island were old, old beyond history. They hadn't changed—and they didn't like change, and newness—

Illustrated by Kramer.

Take it easy, buddy; *er* . . . just wanted to ask for a match.

Thanks. American, ain't you? Newspaperman?

O. K., O. K. So you ain't a newspaperman. It's all the same to me. Funny, though, I could have sworn you were a . . . hey, don't go 'way.

We don't see many Americans in Puerto Sangre. Yeah, yeah, I know—strangers don't tap guys on the back in dark alleys.

Matter of fact, you ain't exactly a stranger. Not having much luck trying to hire a boat to Friday Island, eh? I know all about it. Yeah. I been watching you for three days, buddy. Want to know something? You'll rot in this stinking banana port before you'll get one of these *muchachos* to take a boat to the island.

You'll buy a boat? Sure, you could—and cheap. And *if* you could get a crew, and *if* you could sail her about nine-hundred-odd miles, the patrol boats would take care of you.

The San Salador coast patrol, friend. They're off the island three hundred and sixty-five days a year. And nobody goes ashore, pal. Not any more. But if you did slip in past the cutters—you'd stay there, on the island.

It's simple, you see—no one gets on, and no one gets off—ever. Twice a year, I hear, they drift a barge load of supplies ashore.

They tell it along the waterfront how you can see the little figures come down out of the island, then, and swarm over the barge.

Manny Schwartz? Who's he? Torgier? Now what would a poor devil like me, who doesn't know where the next drink or the next meal's coming from, know about Manny Schwartz?

I'll be all right in a shake. Just a . . . a touch of malaria.

Did you say a drink?

Sure . . . sure—there's a *cantina* right at the end of the alley—just a step. Hi, Pablo! You, there, within! *Dos tequilas*. Ah-h! Colonel, yours truly! Pablo—*dos tragos mas*—two more.

No! We won't go inside, I tell you! The light . . . . the light hurts my eyes. We sit here, in the *entrada*.

Manny Schwartz? Yeah—you start thinking, and the tequila helps some, and then the little things begin coming back to you. Sure, I knew Manny.

Better than anyone else alive, I guess.

Who doesn't remember Manny? Top producer at Magnafeatures, richest guy in the industry, discoverer of Linda Warren, Academy Award winner three years in a row.

And, of course, all his trouble with Uncle Whiskers.

That was what did it. First the wage-and-hour business, and finally, when they caught him trying to run out on his income tax.

"Government, and more government," he screams at me that night, after he'd written out the check for the tax, plus the penalties. "Taxes and monopoly suits," he yells, "boards and commissions trying to tell me how to run my business and treat my help! Two-bit schlimiels in Washington telling Manny Schwartz how to make pictures!"

As usual it wound up with me getting an assignment—an easy, simple little chore. All I had to do was find a spot somewhere in the world where Manny could make movies without being annoyed by rules or regulations or constitutions or laws. A snap.

Pablo! Forget the little glasses—bring the bottle.

Yeah. Where was I? Oh, sure, Manny. So I start out, and before I'm done I make Marco Polo look like a commuter. How far and where to—no matter. I finally report back with news of this San Salador, whose tequila we now enjoy. No more for you? Then you'll excuse me. Yeah. So I tell Manny about the place, and the bananas, and malaria, and how you can buy the President for the cost of a second-rate Western serial and the Army thrown in, all fifty of 'em, for an animated cartoon.

He frowns and shakes his head. "Joey," he says, "you say they got a President? That means they got a Congress, Joey, and a Congress can do anything, any time."

"Buy the Congress, then," I come back.

"I've tried that, Joey," he says. "They don't stay bought. No, Joey, I want I should make a real change—a complete change, and that don't sound like the place."

Then I do it. I jokingly mention this island that San Salador owns, and cares nothing about. A gag, you see?

"I see his ears prick up. "Tell me more, Joey," he says.

"Listen," I say. "I was kidding. What do you care about this island? You can't even see it on a map. Nobody lives there. Once a year the little brown boys send out a boat just to make sure it's still there. It's nine hundred miles from anywhere."

"Did you say nine hundred miles, Joey?" he says. "Nine hundred miles from the nearest supreme court? Joey, have you seen this island?" No, I tell him, I ain't seen it and don't want to.

"Joey," he says, "find me a picture of this island."

Did you ever hold a needle hunt in a haymow? Neither did I, but I went hunting for pictures of Friday Island so I know what it's like. After I hate to tell you how many expense accounts later, I locate this Worsnop College.

Neither did I ever hear of it before, but there it is, tucked away in the hills away down in the deep moonshine belt. And I locate this old mug with the key to the college museum.

The old guy lets me in one night and sets down his lantern and starts pawing through some old files he says ain't been opened since the year One, or some such date. I wait. By and by he straightens up and shoves this stuff at me. It's photos—three spotty old photos. I look at the first one.

It's a shot of a wash basin floating upside-down on the ocean, away off in the distance. There's a coffee can sitting on the basin.

"What's this?" I ask the old gent.

"Friday Island," he answers.

I grab the next picture. This one is from maybe a mile offshore. At that distance, you can see it ain't a coffee can—it's a great, solid circular chunk of

rock sticking straight up out of the center of the island like a stovepipe hat. I'm concentrating on it, wondering how high those cliffs might be, when I notice this business that's like a forest of little fingertips growing up out of the sloping sides of the wash-basin part, all pointing straight up at the sky.

"What's those?" I ask the old guy.

He eyes me kind of funny and hands me the last picture.

Pal, believe me, I've run off a batch or two of the D. T.'s in my day, and I've had some nice nightmares, but the face that looks back at me out of that spotty old print is its own nightmare.

Did I say looked? If it had eyes, you couldn't see 'em. It was just that you knew there were eyes. Features—a nose, a mouth, yes. But always its those deep cavities of shadow looking out at you.

I looked away. So would you have. When I look again, I see the whole thing is carved out of rock, and standing on a sort of a platform. "What is that thing?" I bleat to the old guy. He shakes his head. He doesn't know that, nor whoever took the pictures, or why.

Well, two nights later Manny has the photos in his office at the studio. He looks 'em over for a long time, that night, and after awhile he nods, and chuckles to himself.

"How high would you say them cliffs was, Joey?" he wants to know.

"How should I know?" I say. "Maybe three, maybe five hundred feet high. Why?"

He chuckles some more. "It'll do, Joey," he says. "We'll do all right there. It ain't the ideal place—but we'll make some changes."

"You'd have to make plenty of changes," I growl. "Too many. Let's forget the whole business."

"We'll make 'em, Joey," he says, handing me the pictures back. "You are looking," he says softly, "at the new home of the Manny Schwartz Productions."

When I recover from the first shock, I scream at him, "Are you crazy?" I say, "Look at these photos again. You can't make pictures in a place like that."

"The place will be mine, Joey," he says softly, "Mine, Manny Schwartz's, and nobody will tell nobody there what to do except me, Joey."

I shake the close-up shot under his nose. "You mean," I yell, "you want to go to a place where they got a thing like this? Look—there's maybe hundreds more of 'em, and who knows what kind of faces the rest have got."

He squints at the face in the photo a second. "Pretty cheap sculpture, Joey," he says. "Pretty lousy. We got boys over in the art department can do better, much better." He stands up.

"You're going down there, Joey," he says. "You'll be my advance man. Fix up the deal with the banana boys, and then go on to the island. Suppose I don't like it, Joey? I'll change it, boy. I'll change it."

He was gonna change it. Whatever else I think of Manny I have to hand it to him. What he did he did big. Always to the last, it was big.

Everybody got seven-year contracts, with six-month vacations written in. He was taking along Linda Warren and Robert Gordon, his two stars, and Boleslav, the director, and a raft of supporting and bit players, and sound men and cameramen and gaffers and grips and cutters and scene painters.

There was equipment being assembled—props and machinery and miles and miles of library film with every kind of outdoor background in the world on it.

You remember all that in the papers, about that time.

So I'm the guy who gets sent on ahead, with two whole shiploads of workmen and materials and machinery and foremen, and orders to whip ahead construction on power plants and studio buildings and housing.

After awhile we left the regular steamer lanes and slogged on south, day after day, across that empty circle of

ocean that you never reach the edge of. I read a poem, once, and there was a line in it I won't forget: *"We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea."* Maybe we weren't the first, but it felt like it.

All along, you see, since that night at Worsnop College, I have a wrong feeling about the whole business, and the farther we go, the worse it gets. And then, one morning, there it is—a little upside-down wash basin away out there on the water ahead, with a coffee can riding on top of it.

And the next morning, I went ashore.

We ran one of our light motorboats in through the surf just as it was getting light. The sun wasn't up yet, and there was a west wind blowing, like it had been blowing through the night and all the day before.

The beach was grayish sand, and there was a line of stuby bluffs, the same color at the back of the beach, with a kind of slot in 'em at one place. I made for that, calling for the rest to follow me.

The sun broke over the ocean and the island just as it reached the top—the same spot where Linda Warren ran up, later on. I almost butted straight into it before I even saw it. Then I must have yelled, or screamed, and the others came up on the double.

Because there it stood, looking down at me—the face in the picture.

The face was a whole face. But the eyes are the part I dream about, now, the times I can't help myself and drop off to sleep. I say eyes; you'd maybe say just black holes of shadow at the top of a rock column.

But empty holes can't look at you, can they? There's gotta be eyes, don't there? And there *were* eyes, only—

They didn't see me. They simply looked at me and some way I knew that for those eyes I didn't exist. I wasn't there. They couldn't see me because I wasn't there. Another drink, quick, buddy.

Thanks.

Then the rest of the gang came pounding up the bluff, and saw the thing, too.

We scrammed away from it. We talked loud to each other about it. Until we topped the next little rise, and ran into the second one, and the third one, and all the others.

There were scores of them, they stood up over the slope of that island like trees in an orchard, and each and every face of them was like the one before. The same eyes were looking at you from everywhere, no matter which way you turned.

We got back to the beach, not talking to one another. One thing I knew now for sure, this was no place to bring people to. But when we get back to the beach, the barges are already landing the heavy equipment and machinery and trucks.

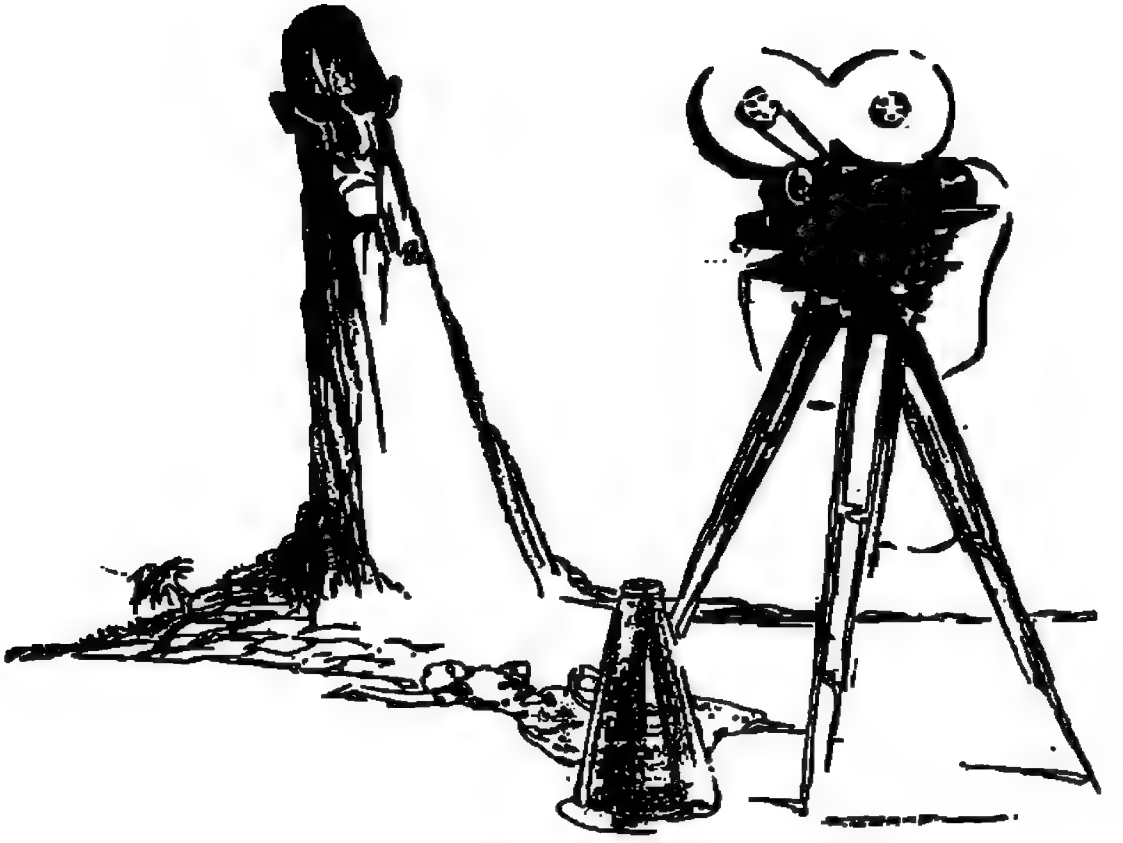
What could I do then—radio Manny about what I'd seen? Seen what? At that point, I was still more afraid of looking like a fool.

I went ahead.

The other things took more time to sink in. There was the color of the place—rocks, dirt and the long grass that was the one growing thing, all the same ashy-gray, like weak water color. One day, I realize that the weather hadn't changed since the first day. Night and day, day and night, it was that same west wind blowing across the island, and always the same thin, smoky haze racing with it—not a mist, but the pale, dreary sun that got through was sadder than none at all. The temperature never varied a degree, night or day.

Those were the little things. I couldn't tie 'em up to anything, they just ate at your nerves gradually. After the first week, I knew the men felt it; they were cracking up. They were working, yeah; but there was no shouting, no loud talking.

A truck would roar, or a donkey engine rattle suddenly. Men would stop work, straighten up, look around quick, at the nearest one of *them*. I know; I caught myself doing it. You looked to



see if they'd heard; if they'd noticed. But they never did.

At the end of the first month comes the deputation, asking me to call for ships, wanting to go home. They claimed they couldn't stand the work, that the climate was bad for them. Matter of fact—the climate was good. There wasn't a sick man on the island. The cursed spot was as antiseptic as an operating room.

I jollied 'em. I was keeping myself half drunk morning and night, by then. I laughed at 'em, told 'em to get back to work. I waved the contract at 'em, and then, while they watched, I locked the radio-room door, and told 'em I'd smash the apparatus before I'd send their message. Did they rush me? No. A couple of 'em broke down and began to cry, though.

Maybe you begin to savvy a little of what I'm trying to get out of me. You've seen working stiffs, lazy, or just mean. But have you ever seen a crowd of big, husky fellows scared, frightened like little kids? That's what I was up against. And scared of what? Of a crowd of ten-foot rock statues that never bothered you—just looked at you.

Time went by. I kept on drinking, little work got done. I didn't know what to tell Manny. So I lied on the radio—told him everything was swell. Then one morning there they were—two big freighters, and a little liner, standing in from the north, whistles blowing like mad.

I came out of my shack the minute I heard the first blasts. Already, every man on the island was gathered down on the beach, in a packed, quiet crowd, watching.

Bands were playing on the ships,

jazzy stuff, the hit tune from Manny's last musical. The west wind carried it in to us.

Then a launch put off from the liner. Right away I picked out Manny in it, then Linda Warren and Rob Gordon with him, and apparently a lot of girls. All of 'em were in some kind of funny costumes. Also, there's a big guy alongside Manny that I can't place.

I met 'em at the end of our little dock. "Hello, Joey," Manny yells at me. "So this is it, eh, kid? Windy, ain't it?"

He turns around. "Come on, boys and girls," he hollers to the mob, "this is it. Come on, Queen Isabella." He says this to Linda, helpin' her up. The bands out on the liner strike up "California, Here I Come," and Manny strides in along the dock, carrying this flag on a long pole, and so help me, a sword. He's wearing these silly short pants and a kind of cloak and beret, and all the rest are in these old-time outfits, too. The minute he gets onto the beach, he shakes out the flag, a yellow one with a big Magnafeatures "MF" embroidered on it, and whips out the sword.

"I claim this island," he shouts, "in the name of Manny Schwartz Productions," and hits the beach with his sword. Then I get it. Manny is Columbus, see, like in the painting, remember?

"I proclaim," he yells, "freedom for free enterprise." He looks around and grins. "That means no taxes, boys and girls," he says. "Let's get pictures!" The other dopes cheer, there's a fanfare from the ships, and the chorus gals, in their little costumes, crowd around Manny, giggling like a herd of canaries. The flash bulbs go off, *bang, bang.*

He looks at me. "Why ain't you cheering, Joey," he asks me. Then he notices the mob of my workers just standing there, watching those ships. Up to now, he'd paid 'em the same attention he would a bunch of extras.

"Joey," he squawks, "why don't them dopes cheer, too?"

"Maybe they don't feel like it," I say.

"What kind of a crack is that?" he shoots back.

"Any kind you like," I tell him. He stares a minute at me, and then decides to drop it. "School's out, kids," he hollers. "C'mon, I'll show you the studios." He starts up through the slot in the bluffs where we have a road, now, and the crowd in their phony getups come chattering after.

Right then, we hear Linda Warren's scream.

Linda has run on ahead a ways, like the kid she was—up the hole in the bluffs, and around out of sight.

Manny and me got there in a dead heat. We see Linda, crouching there on the gray dirt of the road in her gaudy, red-and-yellow costume, her arms covering her head.

Up over her rears the face, twice as tall as a man, the dark holes in it looking down at her, and at all the rest of us, without seeing any of us.

I reached her first, and picked her up. She's shaking as she clings tight to me. "Joey," she says, "Joey, it looked at me." Then she jerks a quick glance up at it and shudders harder. "Get me away from here," she cries, "Manny, I won't stay in this place!"

Out on the ship the band swings into "Happy Days Are Here Again."

For once the great Manny Schwartz ain't got anything to say. Linda goes on. "Get me away, Joey," she says. "It looks at me like I'm already dead!" She's hysterical, of course. But the men down by the dock have heard, and they're coming up, still silent, watching her and the rest of us. And now a new voice breaks in.

"Most remarkable," the voice says, very quiet and deep, "most remarkable."

I look around, and it's the big guy that rode in with Manny. He walks right up to the rock face and stares back at it, while nobody makes a sound, and you can hear the steady blowing of the wind.

"Who," I inquire, "would you be?"

"I am Anton Torgler," he says without taking his eyes off the face.

"Oh," I say, "the sculptor, eh? Well, Mr. Torgler, you're just the man we need. How about sculpturing us a couple of statues, eh? We need some. Ha, ha!"

He pays no attention. "If I had done this thing," he says, kind of to himself, "I would indeed be the greatest sculptor of all time, my friend."

"Get rid of it!" yells a voice out of the crowd of workers, the first sound any of 'em has uttered that day, and it's like a spark of gasoline. In a second they're yelling and howling like animals.

"Let's knock it down," another voice yells, and a bigger roar goes up. The whole crowd of 'em begins moving in toward the face. Torgler looks around then, and he jumps square in front of the face.

"Fools," he shouts, "you do not know what—"

But it's Manny who stops them. Manny, who all of a sudden is beside him with both arms up in the air. The men stop, and their yelling dies away.

"Men," he says, "this is our island. We're here to make pictures, and we're going to make 'em. And if this ain't a good place to make 'em in, we'll change it so it is."

"I don't think we got room here for these . . . these hunks o' phony set-dressing," he says. "They'll be in the way. I can see that a lot needs to be done around here. But"—and he stops a second—"I'll do it in my own good time, and *in my own way!*"

The guys cheer, then. Manny stands there, taking it, and grinning, with that fixed gleam in his eyes.

"Come here, Torgler," he says, pointing in front of himself. The big guy faces him. Manny points his finger at his own face.

"See this," he says. "Look at this face, Torgler. It's the face of Manny Schwartz. Not pretty. Fat, yes; a hooked nose, yes. But my own. And I'll have my own face on my own island."

He swings around, and shoots his finger up at the sheer, gray stone front of the big cliffs at the center of the island. "Put my face up there, Torgler," he shouts. "We'll see," he says, "what kind of expressions this sour-puss rock garden will wear, then!"

I'm watching Torgler. The guy looks at Manny a moment, then up at the face behind him, with the two dark holes, that hasn't heard any of it, doesn't even know it's happened.

He bows and walks away.

I don't know—it tumbles through my head, after that, like one of those screwy montages in one of the old UFA pictures.

I can see Torgler's workmen swarming up the face of the big cliff, and the big sheets being suspended from the rim. I knew, then, that this had been Manny's secret idea from the start, when he sees the picture of the cliffs. He had big ideas, Manny.

I can remember Boleslav shouting scenes of a picture that was gonna be called "The Flame of Paris," believe it or not. There was a whole street of false-front houses they called the Rue des Dames, and the sound men and camera crew working just like back at home and cables laying around on the ground and all. And I remember happening to look through between two of the phony fronts, and seeing a stone face staring at me between them two plaster houses!

I noticed there had to be a lot of retakes. Linda Warren was all the time blowing up on her lines. She'd never used to blow up on her lines before.

I remember well the night I'm on the beach, walking by myself. Manny lets me alone, now, and that's all right with me, but I gotta keep some kind of grip on myself, and so I walk, because I feel more and more that all of us are like people at a party we ain't been asked to.

I'm on the beach, and I almost run into this guy coming the other way.

Then I see that it's Torgler. We stop and look at one another a minute.

"How long, now, Mr. Torgler?" I say to him, finally.

He knows what I mean. "Soon," he says in his deep voice. "Very soon, now."

"Do you ever feel, Mr. Torgler," I ask him, "as though you're doing something kind of—out of line, up there?"

"My friend," he says to me, "my friend, I am a famous man, yes. That does not mean I am a rich man. When Mr. Manny Schwartz offers me—well, much money—to come here with him, although he does not tell me why, I asked no questions. I took his money. It was welcome.

"Now I will answer your question. I feel that my work there"—he nods at where there's a glare of lights away up against the cliffs behind the sheets—"is the most extreme insult that could be offered by me to something which does not even know I exist."

"Mr. Torgler," I yell, "that's what I feel, myself, when those eyes look . . . look through me. What is it?"

He laughs kind of soft. "They are awful, are they not?" he says, in that funny lingo he talks. "Those eyes in those faces. Shall I tell you why, my friend? When I look into them I feel that they look past me, around me, with never a suspicion that I am there." He stops a minute.

"For those eyes," he says, "this place has not changed since you and I and Schwartz came here. They are the outward symbols of something that thinks in terms of milleniums, aeons. If we lived out our whole life spans, from birth to death, beneath their gaze—that span would be as the flick of a second to them. They would not even notice us. On this island, you, I, none of us even exist."

It strikes like an ice-cold chill. "Mr. Torgler," I chatter, "they see *something*, somewhere. What do they see?"

"My friend," he says, "perhaps they see—eternity."

"You mean," I whisper, "we're part of it?"

"What I mean," he says, "is that we are invaders of it . . . of the abode of one of the quiet, insensate forces which is molding mankind as I mold my clay, the force that drives mankind toward uniformity. What do we see in the world today? Strange philosophies, totalitarianism, regimentation! The death of individuality is decreed."

His voice rises above the sound of the surf. "Whence comes it, all this passion and mania for uniformity? Well, all things have their sources; and here, God help us all, we have stumbled on the very source, the *ethos*, of the uniform. As oil repels water, so will this place repel change, all that does not conform. The horror of this spot, my poor friend, is eternal sameness, forever and ever!"

"But this is just an island, not an ethos," I yelp, "whatever that is—"

"Good night, my friend," he says. He's gone, then, up the beach.

And so it goes on, day after day. Except by then I'm feeling this kind of pressure around me, like water was rising behind a dam, and a pressing me against it, and something would break in me, under it.

I know, now, it was me, fighting it. Fighting it.

And then, one day it's *the* day, and that night is *the* night.

No more sounds of work from behind the big sheets against the cliff. At the foot, a few carpenters put the last touches on a reviewing stand.

That afternoon, guys start out quietly in twos and threes, lugging ropes and pulleys and heavy stakes. And by sundown, there's a two-inch cable around the forehead of every statue, rigged to stakes planted in the ground.

By sundown, every soul on the island except the guy on watch at each one of the faces, is waiting in a mob below the cliffs—hundreds of 'em, waiting. The heavy trailers with big floodlights are in

position. Just as the sun is going out of sight, Manny's car stops at the reviewing stand.

He gets out, with Linda, and goes up on the stand. Nobody's paying any attention to me, only Linda. She grabs my hand, and I feel that hers is trembling.

Over nearby, through the dusk, I can just make out one of the faces, standing in a clear space. Dark as it is, I can see those two holes. I look over at Torgler. His face is like a guy who's just been sentenced to death.

I know, because once I saw a guy sentenced to death.

The only sound on the island, now, is the sound of the west wind blowing. The people packed in around us are as silent as though they were just a bunch of the statues themselves.

Into that complete silence explodes a brassy blast of trumpets right behind me. I jump at least two feet and nearly knock down Manny. He turns and glares at me as he stands up. I see then the trumpets were to set the stage for him. A baby spot picks him up. He grabs a microphone.

"Hiya, boys and girls," his voice booms out, and echoes back from the cliffs like in an empty auditorium. I ain't here tonight to make a speech. I'm here to keep a promise—about this second-rate statuary here. It ain't bad of its kind"—there's a kind of scared laugh from somewhere in the crowd—"but it lacks variety. I'm changing that. Manny Schwartz always keeps his word."

He turns toward the nearest face. "All right, boys," he yells. "Over she goes!" The cliffs echo it back. "Over she goes."

The guys at the ropes on the face take it up. "Over she goes!" they yell, and

on down the island you can hear another voice repeat it, on into the distance, over and over.

Then there's a noise of rock scraping on rock. I jerk around. Through the darkness I can see the big rock column teeter and sway a little. Then it begins to tip forward, farther and farther—

There's another fanfare. Then hissing and sputtering; the big floods come to life, and you can see the sheets, away up above us, bluish-white in the glare.

"There it goes!" yell a hundred voices. There's a heavy, crunching sound.

I see the huge, dark figure of the big face falling forward. It strikes the ground with a kind of shivering thump, and lays there with those two holes of eyes pressed against the gray dirt. A wild cheer breaks from the crowd and I realize part of it is my voice.

I realize then I hate the face—it and all it stands for, and it hates me and everything I'm for, even if it doesn't know I exist. I start to yell again, and the blare of one single trumpet drowns me out.

The crowd sucks its breath in, all together. Five hundred feet up above us, the big white sheets begin to wrinkle and droop and collapse. They drift away from the top of the cliff, and there it is, Torgler's masterpiece, Manny's face.

Two eyes like a pair of caves scooped in the rock, stare down from that cliff top on all of us, on every man, woman, and kid of us. Deep, black and awful in that glare, they stare at us.

It ain't Manny's face.

I feel the pressure in me snap. I feel something—something—happening in me. And over that crowd, there isn't a sound. Then Linda screams—a raw, ripping scream, and I turn, just as the floodlights go out of control. The big beams sweep down off the rock, crisscrossing crazy. One of them stops right on us for a minute.

Have you ever heard a thousand human beings groan like one man with horror and fear and despair? It went up from all of us like from a dying man, and from me, too, because I was looking at Linda Warren.

I was looking at where her face, the most beautiful face in pictures, had been. The eyes . . . the eyes, they looked at me and didn't see me, looked through me and past me.

And I knew that *she* knew.

There was a growl like from a wild animal, and something in Manny Schwartz's clothes, with those eyes staring from it, shrieked past me, and rolled off into the falling, crawling mass below—a thousand human bodies, different sizes, different clothes, but the same awful, frozen face was on every one of them. The floodlights swung wild and crazy across 'em, and they gave out sounds, but the faces never changed, and the eyes stared everywhere.

I heard a voice, like Anton Torgler's crying, somewhere, "Eternal sameness, forever and ever!" And I don't remember any more.

That is, until I find myself in the open boat, with no land in sight, but the sun is shining bright and clear, and a soft wind is blowing from the south. Then I heard the short blasts of the steamer's whistle.

How I got into the boat, or how far it drifted with me before that San Salador cutter sighted me, I'll never know.

No, I don't need another drink. I've told it now. That's what I needed to do. Tell 'em. "Eternal sameness, forever and ever." And *they're* out there.

You want proof. Yeah, I knew you were a newspaper guy. You want proof. Pictures, maybe. Sure.

I'll give you pictures, sonny. Step here, into the light from the doorway—so.

Lift up my hat brim.

See?

THE END.

Clean-up

by Cleve Cartmill

The old man was a sinner, a petty, mean-minded sinner, and would have died as such—if the ghoul hadn't made a bargain with him. That drove him to clean up his books—disastrously!

Illustrated by Kelliher

Amos R. Grubble didn't bother to return the janitor's greeting as he entered his apartment house. He accorded it only a half turn of his long, narrow head, and a cold stare through silver-rimmed spectacles.

From the tail of his eye he saw that the lean man with the straight black hair was still near. Near, and coming up the apartment steps.

Amos R. Grubble turned away from the janitor, who was repairing the flaked gilt of one of the fancy door lamps, stepped through the door and let it close in the stranger's face. He was halfway to the elevator, on the far side of the lobby, when he heard the door open. Footsteps padded after him across the carpet.

They stood before the elevator, Mr. Grubble and the lean man with the straight black hair and deep-set eyes, while the indicator arrow fell through a series of numbers to 1. The door opened and Mr. Grubble's pretty neighbor, a musical-comedy star, stepped out.

She flashed Mr. Grubble a look of contempt from large black eyes. He returned it with interest, thinking that today he would force a showdown between himself and the apartment owner-manager. She was an octoroon, this girl, and Mr. Grubble's maternal grandfather had been a Southern colonel.

The exchange of cold glances ended. It ended when the girl shifted her eyes to the lean man beside Mr. Grubble.

"Aghhhh!"

It was a shuddering gasp of horror. She shrank against the door jamb, flung out forked fingers at the stranger, and fled across the lobby.

Mr. Grubble thought it was strange, but he didn't really care. "Expect anything from her," he thought. So he made no reference to the incident as he and the man rode up to the fourteenth floor on which Mr. Grubble maintained a spacious bachelor apartment.

To his mild surprise, the stranger stepped out behind him. For the first time, a little frown puckered Mr. Grubble's low forehead. The stranger followed along the corridor, stood courteously silent as Mr. Grubble inserted his key.

Mr. Grubble's hand was motionless on the knob. He fixed the stranger with a steady glance.

"Look here. Are you following me?"

"Yes, Mr. Grubble."

"Why?"

"I have a business transaction to discuss with you."

Mr. Grubble thawed somewhat. A business transaction was always welcome. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, blocked the fervent rush of his welcoming black Cocker with a foot.

"Be quiet, Bumps," he said to the dog. To the stranger, "Come in."

Bumps transferred his attention to the stranger, and went away. He seemed to be afraid, but he left the room with dignity, with stumpy tail aloft. As he entered the bedroom, he flung a last liquid glance over his black shoulder at the stranger.

The man closed the hall door and seated himself without an invitation. He lounged in the chair, Mr. Grubble thought, with an almost unearthly grace. His deep-set eyes were inscrutable, and a flicker of pleasure stirred in Mr. Grubble's chest. Here was an opponent worthy of his most guileful chicanery.

"Now. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I am J. B. Smith, Mr. Grubble. I want to do you a favor."

Mr. Grubble felt faint contempt for the hackneyed technique. "Ah?" he said distantly.

"You're likely to fall on your face at any moment," Smith said, "and not get up again. I saw the squib in yesterday's paper."

Mr. Grubble said nothing. He waited, thinking of the strange heart ailment which had brought him a paragraph in an afternoon tabloid. Spasmic paralysis of the bundle of His. He had collapsed, been revived on three separate occasions when the tiny bundle of nerves had suddenly refused to activate his heart. One more time, the doctors said. Maybe two, but only one was more probable. Tonight, tomorrow, next week, month, year—but sometime.

"You're headed for hell," Smith went on. "Your soul will be forked, roasted, twisted, tortured forever. Did you know that?"

Mr. Grubble didn't smile. The remark deserved not even that much notice. He went to the hall door and opened it.

"I have no time for a religious fanatic. Good day, Mr. Smith."

Smith clasped long fingers over his thin stomach. "Close the door," he said quietly. "I'm not a religious fanatic. I'm here to save your soul from hell, all right. But after you're dead. Not now."

Mr. Grubble was intrigued, not by the tone or attitude of Mr. Smith, but by the sheer uncommercialism of the man. So far as Mr. Grubble could figure, nobody could make a nickel from this approach. But Smith, apparently, made rather a good thing of it if one were to judge by that quiet tweed and the Cordovan shoes. Mr. Grubble closed the door and assumed his judicious air.

"Ah?" he said.

"In hell," Mr. Smith elaborated, "you retain your identity. It is *you* who suffers some rather ingenious tortures, the same you who stands here now. Now, I can't preserve your conscious identity after death, but I can save you that torture."

Mr. Grubble sat down and thought. He looked for the profit motive. So far, Smith had offered nothing for sale. It was a long build-up to what must be some sort of soul insurance.

Mr. Grubble smiled, full of sly confidence. Perhaps this lean man had caught suckers before, but Mr. Grubble wasn't rising to the bait. How could you guarantee salvation—before death?

As he opened his mouth to put the question into words, his spaniel stuck its head around the bedroom door, looked somewhat fearfully at Mr. Smith for a moment, and ducked back. Amos Grubble's question came out a trifle shaky.

"But I guarantee nothing," Smith answered. "All I want is permission

to eat your soul. Salvation? That's a matter of opinion. I save your soul from eternal torture and I suppose that's a sort of salvation."

Mr. Grubble's reaction froze. He had no coherent thought. He sat quite still and looked at Mr. Smith. He did this for some time.

Then, "Who . . . what's your racket?" he asked.

"What?" Smith echoed quietly. "I should think that's obvious. I am a ghoul. Who? I don't know, really. I have absorbed some forty souls in the past eight hundred years. I imagine each had its effect on my personality, so that I am—ah, something of a mess, inside. But I like it. I like it better than death."

Mr. Grubble caught a breath, then examined the room with studied care. Nothing was distorted. The door of his china cabinet threw back his own reflection. The bricks of his imitation fireplace were straight planes and ninety-degree angles. The pattern of his Persian carpet retained its intricate symmetry. Nothing wavered. He was not asleep.

He took off his silver-rimmed spectacles, polished them with a large square of fine pocket linen, replaced them and turned his little eyes on Smith.

"Bunk," said Mr. Grubble. "What a thing to say."

Mr. Smith allowed a tiny smile to flicker across his broad, sensual mouth. "Yet you almost believe it."

Privately, Grubble admitted it. There was something about the man which had caused Bumps to act strangely, and that girl. Mr. Grubble thought triumphantly that her action clinched his argument that she was Negro. They were supposed to be sensitive to . . . to . . . well, *things*. But how could he offer it in evidence? He couldn't say to the manager, "She's a Negro because she sensed a ghoul in the elevator."

Mr. Grubble snapped out of his meandering and looked hardly at Smith.

"Nonsense," he snapped. "You're just crazy. That's all. Now get out."

Smith sort of flowed to his feet. "Mr. Grubble, you're a brave man. You may die at any moment, yet you face the prospect of eternal torture with blind conventionality which does not admit the possibility of its existence."

Amos Grubble groped around in this statement for a moment. He became a little angry.

"Even if there are such things as ghouls," he snapped, "and even if you are one, I don't care. Maybe there's a hell, maybe not. Regardless, I'm not going there. I've lived an upright life. I've never even been sued for anything."

Mr. Smith sat down again. "I suppose I'll have to show you," he said.

Before Grubble could protest, the lean man spoke a few phrases. They were in a language which Amos Grubble could not comprehend, but they had a haunting rhythm which he retained in his memory.

They waited. Nothing happened.

Smith sighed, murmured the phrase again. This time Mr. Grubble caught a word or two. They waited some more.

And nothing happened.

"Look here," Mr. Grubble began, but Smith cut him off with a cream-colored palm, and spoke the words again.

Someone—or something—appeared. It sat in the middle of Mr. Grubble's Persian carpet. It was small, and scrawny, and—scaly. Under one arm it carried a huge black book. In white pointed teeth it carried, what at first seemed to be a quill recently dipped in ink, but which proved to be the tip of its tail. It fastened snapping red eyes on Mr. Smith, removed the tail from its teeth, shook the dark liquid on Mr. Grubble's carpet. Its enormous spectacles, which were hooked around its horns, picked up some of its eyes' angry color.

"Well?" it snarled.

"Amos Grubble," said Smith. "Amos R. Grubble."

The creature transferred its malevolent stare to Mr. Grubble. It sniffed. It practically snorted.

Then it opened the big black book, ran the tip of its tail down index tabs to G, searched out the name.

"One of the worst," it said. "Let's see. Hm-m-m. Stole money from mother's purse . . . no, that isn't bad. Everybody does it. Let's see. Filched a nickel from a crippled beggar. Stole bicycle from next door, sold it. Jeered at five year old because she believed in Santa Claus. Took partner's share of business on technicality in contract. Foreclosed on a piece of property which brought ruin to woman with two children. Lied, lied, lied, lied. Forty-seven instances of lies which hurt others. For the past five years has walked a block out of his way to buy newspaper from blind newsboy. Put two cents instead of three in his cup. There's lots more. Do you want it?"

"Heavens, no," said Mr. Smith. "I didn't know it was that bad. Go away."

"Wait!" Mr. Grubble cried. "Don't I get any credit? I don't smoke, drink or consort with . . . ah, women."

The creature with the book sniffed, snorted, said, "Fool!" and vanished.

Mr. Grubble experienced a sensation of cringing, inside. Shriveling, perhaps. It centered in his chest, formed a cold, writhing knot of half belief.

"It isn't true," he whispered, staring at the spot where he had seen the creature. "Lies, lies, lies, lies." His voice rose. "Lies, *lies!*"

"No," said Smith judicially. "Hell's Recorder may be nasty-tempered, but he's accurate. Well?"

"You hypnotized me," Mr. Grubble floundered. "It was an illusion. A trick. I've"—he gave a hollow laugh—"seen better in vaudeville shows. Paid

IF YOU'RE MAKING MORE MONEY

...WATCH OUT!

THIS YEAR Americans are going to make—minus taxes—125 billion dollars.

But this year, due to the war, we are going to have only 80 billion dollars' worth of goods to spend this on.

That leaves 45 billion dollars' worth of money burning in our jeans.

If each of us should take his share of this 45 billion dollars (which averages approximately

$330 per person) and hustle out to buy all he could with it—what would happen is what happens at an auction where every farmer there wants a horse that's up for sale.

We would bid the prices of things up and up and up. Instead of paying $30 for a suit we're going to pay $45. Instead of $5 for a pair of shoes we're going to pay $8.

This bidding for scarce goods is going to raise prices faster than wages. Wages just won't keep up.

So what will people do?

U. S. workers will ask for more money. Since labor is scarce, a lot of them will get it. Then farmers and business men who feel the pinch are going to ask more money for their goods.

And prices will go *still higher*. And the majority of us will be in that same old spot again—only worse.

This is what is known as Inflation.

Our government is doing a lot of things to keep prices down . . . rationing the scarcest goods, putting ceiling prices on things, stabilizing wages, increasing taxes. But the government can't do the *whole job*. So let's see what *we* can do about it.

If, instead of running out with our extra dough, and trying to bid on everything in sight, we buy only what we absolutely need, we will come out all right.

If, for instance, we put this money into (1) Taxes; (2) War Bonds; (3) Paying off old debts;

(4) Life Insurance; and (5) The Bank, we don't bid up the prices of goods at all. And if besides doing this we (6) refuse to pay more than ceiling prices; and (7) ask no more for what we have to sell—no more in wages, no more for goods—*prices stay where they are now.*

And we pile up a bank account. We have our family protected in case we die. We have War Bonds that'll make the down payment on a new house after the war, or help us retire some day. And we don't have taxes after the war that practically strangle us to death.

Maybe, doing this sounds as if

it isn't fun. But being shot at up at the front isn't fun, either. You have a duty to those soldiers as well as to yourself. You *can't* let the money that's burning a hole in your pocket start setting the country on fire.

★ ★ ★

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Use it up
Wear it out
Make it do
Or do without

good money to see 'em. Better than this—far better."

Smith shrugged, got to his feet once more. "On second thought, I don't want your soul, Grubble. It's like a rotten apple. It would make me ill. Well, good-by."

He sauntered to the door, halted when Mr. Grubble flung out a frantic, if feeble, hand.

"Wait!" he gasped. "Look!"

He pointed to the splotches on his carpet. Splotches of what had appeared to be ink still glistened in the afternoon light. "Look!" he repeated. "They're . . . they're real!"

"Of course, Grubble."

"But what . . . what will they do to me? I've been bad, I'll admit. I . . . oh, God! Is there a hell, really, Mr. Smith?"

"A very juicy hell, Grubble."

Grubble was caught in the wave of emotion which shook him from head to foot. He dropped out of his chair to his knees, buried his long face in skinny fingers.

"I don't want to go there," he cried brokenly. "I don't want to go. I don't—"

He broke off, peered over his spectacles at Mr. Smith. "What can I do, what can I do?"

Mr. Smith took his hand from the doorknob. He narrowed his deep-set eyes and said thoughtfully, "If you clean up that fester which you call your soul, I can use it. If you live long enough, that is, to clean it up."

"I will!" Mr. Grubble said fervently. "I will! How can I? What do I do?"

"That," said Mr. Smith, "is your problem. I don't know what you've done that needs atonement. I don't want to know. But you know. You can figure it out."

"I will," Grubble repeated abjectly. "When will you . . . er, come back?"

Mr. Smith's face acquired a look of distaste. His chiseled lips curved down. "Not ever," he said. "We'll make the contract now. I want you to understand that this contract is conditional."

"Yes," Grubble muttered. "Whatever you say."

"Repeat after me, then. 'I, Amos R. Grubble, do hereby grant permission to J. B. Smith to eat my soul when I die. I swear this by Baal and Beelzebub. I further swear by all that I hold sacred. I fully understand that this contract is binding only to me. J. B. Smith is not bound to eat my soul. He may if he so chooses.'"

Amos Grubble repeated the words, and a hand was laid on his shoulder. Not the hand of Mr. Smith. Not anybody's hand, so far as Grubble could see. It was a hand, though. He could feel it.

He could feel it after Mr. Smith had gone sardonically away. It was steady, and proprietory. That hand owned him. Somehow, Grubble knew this, and it brought him an uneasy comfort. He would not go to hell, for he would clean up his soul.

He sat in his chair, and presently the black Cocker came out of the bedroom and nuzzled Mr. Grubble's hand. He scratched the silky ears, as he was wont to do when thinking. The dog whimpered once, cast about the room with great frightened eyes, and shrank against his master's knee.

"It's all right, Bumps," Mr. Grubble said tenderly. "Nothing will get you."

The dog derived comfort from the sound of the voice and quieted. Amos Grubble continued to rub the shining ears. Counterpoint to his motion, he cast back into his memory. The bicycle. His secretary, whose salary he cut after lying about the state of the business. The newsboy. The woman and her children. The octoroon, who lived next door.

He went into action. After a final pat of his dog's head, he went down to the manager's apartment.

"Mr. Roberts," he said, "I want to talk to you about—that girl."

"Frances?" boomed Elvin Roberts. "Come on in, Gabble."

"Grubble," Amos corrected, and followed the big silver-haired man into his living room. He perched on a battered sofa, waited until his host sat at a roll-top desk, lit a cigarette, and tossed the match in a metal wastebasket in the middle of the floor.

"Want a drink?" inquired Roberts.

Mr. Grubble hastily declined. "I think I owe an apology for saying that girl is a Negro. I don't really think she is."

Roberts shrugged his great shoulders, flicked ash toward the wastebasket. "Suppose she is, Gibble? So what?"

"Well," Mr. Grubble said helplesaly, "all I wanted was to apologize. I'm sorry I raised such an issue about the girl."

"Tell her, not me. She knows about it. Way I felt all along was if you didn't like the people that lived here, you could move, and welcome."

Mr. Grubble got to his feet. He turned his head with a start as he became aware once more of the hand on his shoulder. He had not become accustomed to the feel of it. He swiveled his head sheepishly, nodded to Roberts, and went out.

The hand accompanied him. It exerted no pressure, it did not attempt to guide him. It just went along. Mr. Grubble knew a tiny fear, yet he felt like patting this unseen hand. It signfied to him that the ghoul was on the job, and would save Amos R. Grubble's soul from hell.

He went back to his apartment, where he fed his dog. Then he took a set of books from his wall safe and began computing certain items.

Now and then, as he finished with an account, he wrote a check and put it into an envelope which he addressed and stamped. He sent a check to his partner, a sizable check. He sent one to the woman whose property he had foreclosed.

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DOC SAVAGE

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

He wrote a note to the Treasury, saying he had discovered an error in his income-tax report, and inclosed a check for seven dollars and eighty-two cents.

When he had done all he could, he discovered that he was hungry. This was unusual, for he had trained himself to live frugally, and was rarely hungry.

Another unusual feeling he discovered was one of well-being, a warmth for humanity. This stirred long-dead chords of memory; it had been many years since he had felt like this.

He smiled—actually smiled—at his dog, and his wrinkled face tingled with the unaccustomed exercise. "Hello, Bumps," he called. "I'll bring you some hamburger."

The tone, if not the promise, brought the Cocker wriggling across the room. For the first time in its life, Bumps knew the ecstacy of being shoved around by rough but affectionate hands. He growled, made mock attacks, and went almost into paroxysms of joy when Mr. Grubble let loose a cackling, but hearty, laugh.

Still chuckling, Mr. Grubble took a wad of bills from the safe, locked it, shut Bumps in the bathroom after a final romp, and went out to a restaurant where he dined occasionally. He walked through the dismal whisper of early-evening mist, but for him it was sunshine and roses. He felt wonderful.

"Beautiful evening," he said to the startled waitress, to whom he had never spoken a word aside from ordering broth and a glass of milk. "I'll have"—he hesitated, habit patterns momentarily shoving aside his access of good will, then resolutely stabbed the menu with a bony finger—"the New York cut on the regular dinner."

The waitress gulped, noted the order, and hurried away. Mr. Grubble ate heartily, and thought only twice that this meal was terribly expensive. He left a fifty-cent tip and heard, though he did not identify, the gasp of the waitress as he went out the door.

Then, with the hand on his shoulder like that of a reassuring savior, he strode briskly toward the newsstand of the blind boy. En route he smiled at all who caught his eye, a smile which transformed his face from a wrinkled lemon to something almost pleasant. As he walked, he computed.

Five years, he thought. Say three hundred and forty days each year, at a cent a day. Three dollars and forty cents times five in seventeen dollars.

He took a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket when he reached the corner. The boy, a lad of eighteen, turned his sightless face toward the man's approaching footsteps, frowned in concentration, then smiled.

"Hello, Mr. Grubble," he said warmly. "Almost didn't know you, you were in such a hurry. Here's your paper, sir."

Grubble took the paper and gave him the bill. The boy felt it.

"How big is it, Mr. Grubble?"

"It's a twenty, my boy, and it's yours. Don't make change. Keep it all."

"Twenty? Ye gods! Why?"

"Because," Mr. Grubble began. He hesitated. "Because I owe it to you. That's as much as I can say."

This was the literal truth. He wanted to tell how he had short-changed this boy for five years, but he couldn't. He just couldn't. Nobody could.

Well, thanks, Mr. Grubble. This'll buy me and mom both a raincoat."

For the first time in many years, Amos R. Grubble was almost happy. He glowed inside. A spring was in his stride. His little eyes were bright.

Only one more task tonight. Apologize to that girl. On second thought, why not see her show and meet her at the stage door, just like in stories? She was in a musical show of some sort. It should be listed—

He opened the paper, found it. "Dark Is My Song," starring Frances Wing. He winced a little at the price of admission, but ordered an orchestra

seat, tenth row center, and really enjoyed the rhythmic pageantry of motion and the rich round voice of the star.

He was at the stage door for some time in the drizzle before she emerged.

"Miss Wing," he called.

She stopped, eyed him with cold suspicion.

"I want to tell you," he said, stepping near, "that I think your show is fine. And I want to apologize for anything I've done that might have hurt you."

Her suspicion lingered for a moment, then her face took on a halo of pleasure. "Why, you really meant it! You're sweet, Mr. Grubble. It takes a lot of character to make an apology like that. Thank you. My car is here. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No, thanks. I just wanted to get that off my conscience."

After she had gone, he stood in the alley, warm with a sense of right-doing, comforted by the hand on his shoulder. He took a taxi home presently, and tipped the driver.

His sleep that night was no sounder than usual, but his awakening was crisp with an eagerness to meet the day. He had much to do, and it was good.

That day, and the next, he straightened all the little acts. He uncovered fifty-eight instances of lying which he thought had hurt others. He was unable to repair the damage in some of these because of deaths or other reasons, but even so he came out four ahead of the Recorder's forty-seven.

He swept out dusty corners of his conscience, held what he found there in the light of memory and demolished them. He returned many small amounts of money, and bought a new hat to replace one he had borrowed.

When he had made restitution for all that he could remember, he felt hon-

You men with tough beards, tender skin
Don't have to take it on the chin—
Get fast, slick, thrifty shaves each time
With Thin Gillettes, four for a dime!
4 for 10c

estly happy. He was a man again. But habit and a slight fear put him to work for two hours totting up his bank account.

The sum remaining, somewhat to his astonishment, was within a few dollars of the amount he had inherited at his father's death some twenty years before.

Late that night, while lying comfortably in bed, the hand steady on his shoulder, a chill blade of thought stabbed Mr. Grubble's complacency. The Recorder had said, "There's lots more."

Suppose, Mr. Grubble thought fearfully, he hadn't cleaned up his account. It was possible that he had forgotten any number of acts which had been entered on his ledger. When a man is striving to rise at the expense of others, he becomes so adjusted to grabbing an advantage, fair or unfair, that he soon takes no more notice of his little actions than of the number of breaths he draws in a day. Perhaps a thousand items in that big black ledger still remained unbalanced.

Perhaps his soul was not yet clean enough fare for J. B. Smith.

But how could he know? Who was J. B. Smith? If he had lived eight hundred years, the name was probably assumed. He'd have to move around, or people would talk when it was time for him to die and he still lived, maintaining his appearance of jaded youth.

Mr. Grubble got hastily out of bed, gave his disturbed Cocker an absent pat, and leafed through the telephone directory. He found eight J. B. Smiths. One was a Jr., and one was a III. Mr. Grubble could not bring himself to call any of the remaining six.

You don't call up in the middle of the night and say, "Mr. Smith? I'm

looking for a ghoul with the same name. Are you the one?"

Mr. Grubble lit the gas log in his fireplace, and sat staring into the flames. He needed to think.

Suddenly a haunting rhythm began to beat in his brain. Then a word emerged, another, and another. Finally, the spell which J. B. Smith had recited came back in its entirety, and almost without thinking Mr. Grubble muttered the words.

The Recorder appeared again, book under its arm, spectacles hooked around its horns, tailtip between pointed teeth, red anger in its eyes.

It shook inky drops on the carpet again. "Well?" it demanded.

Mr. Grubble explained what he wanted, and the creature made another alphabetical search. It glared furiously at Mr. Grubble.

"You're the type," it grated, "that keeps me after hours. Not satisfied, not ever. Man," it snorted, "why can't you leave well enough alone? Cancellations!" it said. It tapped the open book. "It took me half a day to close your account, and another two hours to get a cherub down to take it away. Don't you think I have anything better to do than make you a candidate for heaven?"

"Heaven?" echoed Mr. Grubble blankly.

"Though why you'd want to go there," the Recorder growled, "is beyond me. All those sour harp strings. All that light. And not a decent fire in the place. Heaven!"

Mr. Grubble was appalled. The hand was still on his shoulder. "What . . . what's it like?" he asked eagerly.

"Dull, from what I hear. Haloes and trumpets. Choir practice. No fireproofing. A half-respectable flame would melt those silly streets. And pearls. Ever see what fire would do to a pearl. *Fffft!*" He snapped his fingers. That's what."

It sounded all right to Mr. Grubble. It sounded better than being eaten by a ghoul. Much better.

"Honestly?" he asked. "Honestly did I clean up my soul enough to enter heaven?"

"You've got a small credit balance," said the Recorder.

A great despair entered Mr. Grubble's ailing heart.

Faint hope stirred, though. "Then the ghoul doesn't get my soul?"

The Recorder showed some interest. "You made a contract? Got a hand on your shoulder?"

"Yes," Mr. Grubble said breathlessly.

The Recorder was amused. It rocked on its scaly heels and chuckled. It rocked harder, and cackled. It slapped skinny flanks, producing a sound as dry and rasping as its mirth.

"Hee hee! Heh heh! Oh, my coals and cinders! This is rich! Wait'll I tell the imps! Just wait! They'll melt!"

Bumps, hearing this burst of good humor, left off shivering under the bed and stuck a friendly head through the bedroom door. He looked at the Recorder.

"Brrf!" he said, eyes button-bright.

The Recorder didn't turn its head. It vanished. Bumps canted his head to one side and peered at the empty space. Mr. Grubble blinked for a second, then sprang to his feet.

"Come back!" he cried almost hysterically. "Isn't there any way? Any—"

The words curdled in Grubble's throat as a numbing paralysis crept over him. Dimly conscious, he realized that the little bundle of muscle, the bundle of His, had stopped agitating his heart.

"No!" was the silent word of horror in his mind. "No, no, no!"

He fought the encroaching unconsciousness with every vestige of his will. He fought death with his new strength, gained by good deeds which had fitted him for heaven.

The struggle left him weak and gasping, and almost dead before his fire. But he lived. Somehow, his heart had started again. He was wrung dry of energy, unable to move except for his eyes.

He saw Bumps approach, full of worry and concern, and from somewhere Mr. Grubble gained strength to smile at the dog. His smile froze with a sort of terror as Bumps jerked his head up, gave a kind of howl, and dived back into the bedroom.

"Who is it?" whispered Mr. Grubble.

"Hm-m-m," murmured the voice of J. B. Smith. "It seems I'm premature. You're a hard man, Grubble, to kill."

Mr. Grubble struggled to a sitting position. He looked up at Smith.

"What do you want?"

Smith shrugged his natty shoulders. "Nothing—yet. You were dying. Naturally, I came."

"Look here, Mr. Smith. I'm a good man. I know. My soul is clean. Don't take it."

Smith's deep-set eyes lighted. "Clean? Good! That's the kind I like."

"Take this hand off my shoulder," Mr. Grubble begged. "Let me go. Please let me go."

"Why, Grubble!" Smith was shocked. "What a thing to ask! I saved—or will save—your soul from hell."

"But I don't *have* to go to hell!" Grubble wailed. "I cleaned up my soul completely. I can go to heaven, now. Please let me. You can get another soul. This town is crawling with souls headed for hell. Wouldn't one of them do?"

Smith's amusement was not raucous, like that of the Recorder. He looked down at Grubble with bright eyes, lips barely lifting at one corner.

"I find that simply hilarious, Grubble. I haven't laughed so much in centuries."

He moved toward the door, and once again Mr. Grubble halted him with a plea. "Wait! I'll do anything, Mr. Smith. Anything! Is there no way?"

"Oh, yes," Smith said pleasantly. "There is a way. You can dirty up that nice white soul again, to the point where I wouldn't have it. Then you can go to hell, Grubble. You haven't much time, though. Maybe the next attack will kill you off. I'll see you then, maybe."

Grubble's voice broke. "Haven't you any . . . any compassion? Any sympathy?"

Smith was thoughtful, one hand on the knob. "No-o," he said presently. "It isn't as easy to get souls as you might think, Grubble. I must be constantly on the move, must close my old bank accounts and open new ones under a variety of names. I need a new soul now, and can't let a clean, white one get away. They're rare, Grubble, and highly pleasant. No, I'm afraid I haven't any compassion or sympathy. Judged by your standards, I'm really wicked, I suppose. Ah, well."

Smith shrugged, and went through the door.

Amos Grubble sat motionless, with no strength to rise, and presently tears of despair and hopelessness welled up in his little eyes. His thought had no sequence, he was simply afraid. Presently this emotion changed to anger.

It wasn't fair, he thought. He had worked hard all his life. He had made mistakes, sure. Anybody does. But he had rectified them, of his own free will. He hadn't had to do it. Nobody had stood over him with a gun or anything. He had made restitution for his sins, and was entitled to go to heaven like any *good* man.

And now look, he thought. A wicked blackened creature—a *thing* without a soul of its own, a demon—had reduced him to the status of a fattened pig, a thing to eat.

And furthermore, he thought dolefully, he was right back where he had started in business. He had given away a fortune—for nothing. He had cut his bank account to its original size—and had nothing to show for it.

Being eaten by the ghoul, to be sure, was better than roasting forever in hell, but that wasn't the point. He, Amos R. Grubble, was ready for heaven and unable to set a foot on the path. It was unfair. A demon had him—

He broke off, and his eyes narrowed in thought. A demon. Demons, and such—didn't one exorcise them? Wasn't there a way? A word stirred excitedly around in his mind, so fast that he couldn't quite catch it.

Suddenly, he pounced on it. Voodoo! Black magic, or whatever it was. Africa. Slaves. Negroes.

His thought crystallized. That girl, Frances Wing. She had recognized the ghoul as something horrid, for she had made a gesture. He identified the gesture in some dim recess of memory. She had warded off the evil eye. She had known that much. Maybe she knew more.

He got painfully to his feet, slowly out of his nightshirt, laboriously into his clothes, and went to the girl's apartment door. He was glad, now, that he had apologized. She would not have spoken to him before. Perhaps she would help him now, if she could, and if she were home from her show.

She was. She opened the door and smiled courteously.

"I need help," Mr. Grubble said. "Badly."

"Come in," she invited. "Won't you sit down?" She moved with a lithe flowing grace to a chair and adjusted it for him. Then she sat across the room on a divan. "Now," she said, "what's the matter?"

He told her. He told her the whole story, even the part about the blind newsboy. Whether she believed or not, he couldn't tell. But she listened. When he told her of the hand on his shoulder, her wide black eyes shifted to look but did not narrow in disbelief.

"I thought you might be able to help," Mr. Grubble concluded, "or know of somebody who could. Being part Ne . . . I mean, you recognized him as something . . . uh, something—"

"Evil?" she suggested. "At the elevator, you mean. I don't know why I did that. It was purely instinctive. I forgot him immediately."

"You can't—do anything?"

"No, Mr. Grubble. Honestly, I don't believe in the things you describe. Oh, I haven't any doubt you saw what you did. From your viewpoint, I'm sure it's true. But not from mine."

"But I've got to be free of this," Mr. Grubble said. "Don't you know

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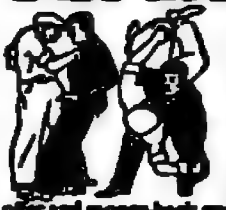

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anyone who could—how do you say it?—exorcise a demon?"

She frowned. She pulled her legs under her and smoothed the mauve dressing gown. "If it's a simple ceremony of exorcism, I suppose I could do it. But it wouldn't do any good, Mr. Grubble."

"But you *could* do it?" he pressed.

"Yes. You see, I won a scholarship while I was in college, and went around the world. I studied native chants, in Haiti among other places. I was taught some other things, too, but I don't believe, Mr. Grubble. I don't believe."

"Miss Wing, *will* you try? My soul is at stake, and I am a *good* man. That's been proved. I don't deserve such a fate."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Grubble."

"But what could you lose, Miss Wing? Please, I'm desperate. I'm at my . . . wit's . . . end." His voice began to tremble. "I don't know . . . wh-what . . . to . . . do. I'm an old man and I haven't hurt anybody, I've made restitution, I've wiped out my sins, I've—"

Amos Grubble broke into sobs, watching the girl from the corner of his eye. When her eyes began to crinkle in sympathy, the intensity of his sobs increased. His thin shoulders were racked by a controlled rhythm. Finally, she rose and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Poor Mr. Grubble," she murmured. "I'll do it for you, if it will make you happy."

He tapered off his sobs realistically. "Th-thank you," he said. "Th-thank you."

"I'll have to collect some materials," she said. "Shall we do it tomorrow at this time?"

Mr. Grubble was appalled. "Now!" he said fervently. "I may die at any moment. Now!"

"But that's impossible. We need an altar, and a sacrifice."

"Make them," he urged. "Make them!"

She looked around the apartment, fixed on her dresser. "I could clean off the top of that," she said thoughtfully, "for an altar. I have some chalk. I could draw symbols on the floor. This robe and a bandanna will do. But we don't have a sacrifice, Mr. Grubble, and I don't think we could find one at this time of night. That can't be substituted."

"What do you need?"

"An animal, or a fowl. A black goat, a black lamb, a black cock—"

"A black Cocker?"

"But he's your pet!"

Amos Grubble thought. He remembered how he had cared for Bumps, fed him, sheltered him, since he was a handful of large-eyed puppy with big ears. He had spent considerable, if you added it a nickel at a time, and threw in that veterinary bill for four dollars and eighteen cents.

"He'd do anything for me," Grubble said. "He'd die for me, gladly."

Frances Wing's face set. "I can't do that. I can't do that."

This sent Amos Grubble into what appeared to be a serious case of hysteria. He fell to the floor, and moaned, and clutched his breast. "Don't let me die now!" he gasped. "My heart, my heart!"

She dropped beside him. "Mr. Grubble, please stop. If it means that much, I'll do it. Go get your poor dog, and a butcher knife. But please understand that I'm using a ceremony I don't believe in to exorcise something I don't think exists."

An hour later, Amos R. Grubble was pushed out of the apartment by a girl who was almost frozen with horror.

"I didn't know," she shuddered, "it would be like this. Get out of here! You're a wicked old man! You've made me wicked. God have mercy on me!"

Mr. Grubble staggered in the corri-

dor, sick with what he had seen and with what he had helped to do. He felt a touch of self-loathing, and a touch of bitter loneliness. Bumps was gone.

But overriding these emotions was one of relief which promised to bloom into happiness. Bumps was gone, yes —but so was the hand from his shoulder. The contract with the ghoul was broken. He was free. He could die now.

Which he did, a few days later while walking in the street. He pitched forward on his long thin face, shattering his silver-rimmed spectacles, and the form that was removed to the nearest hospital was empty. His soul had slipped away on its final journey.

It was like a dark tunnel. The way was smooth and an instinct guided the soul of Amos R. Grubble through thick, horizonless dark.

This soul moved trippingly on its spiritual feet, and strained its eyes for the blaze of light which would mark its eternally happy destination.

A light appeared presently, a spot of yellow in vast blackness. Grubble speeded, and the light grew plainer but no larger. It became a square, and the square became a window in what appeared to be an office. Mr. Grubble made for it, and two shadowy forms fell in beside him.

He stopped at the window, and a face looked up at him from a desk. Grubble felt a cold shock of horrified bewilderment, for this was a familiar face with its red eyes, its spectacles hooked around its horns.

"What are you doing here?" it snapped.

Amos Grubble turned away in a revulsion of fear, but the Recorder snapped, "Wait!" and the two shadowy forms closed in to block any further movement from Grubble. He turned back to the window, not wishing to face their glowing eyes.

"Wait'll I look at this new batch," the Recorder said, and thumbed a sheaf of forms on the desk. Finally one halted the searching claws and inspired a glower at Grubble. "Black magic, huh? And killing your own dog." A pause, a sneer. "I got a lousy job here. Long hours, no thanks, abuse from newcomers, curses from both camps. But I'm glad, see? I'd rather have this than insides like some of you humans. Men!" A snort. "Take him away, boys."

They did.

THE END.

The Moving Finger Writes,

—And Having Writ—

From Tony Boucher.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Fantasy authors don't make fortunes.

You and I know personally the truth of that aphorism, but it's nonetheless a shock to learn that it applies as well to the very greatest in the field.

I remember reading, a few years ago, that M. P. Shiel was subsisting on an exiguous royal pension for indigent authors. And now Bennett Cerf, in his column in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, tells us that Arthur Machen "is in such straitened circumstances that a committee, which includes Bernard Shaw, Max Beerbohm and T. S. Eliot, has been formed to seek help for him."

On the one hand the loyal devotees of Machen who can afford only two bits for a used copy; on the other, the collectors who spend hundreds for scarce firsts—hundreds of which the author never sees a cent. It's a cruel situation, but it makes sense, of a bitter sort.

I hope you'll see fit to print this in —And Having Writ. I don't need to extol Machen to readers of Unknown; there probably is hardly one of them who doesn't owe him as deep a debt for pleasure received as I do. (Or is pleasure the word? "The Great God Pan" is the only story I've ever read that kept me from sleeping.)

Contributions to the Machen fund will be accepted by Alfred Knopf, 501 Madison Avenue, New York. I shouldn't have to say more than that. And don't fear that any contribution is too small; they pile up.—Anthony Boucher.

Helicopters are more reliable, anyway.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

No doubt Mr. D. C. King (Unknown Worlds, August, 1943, p. 136) knows whether he was levitated. As he has not given us the details, and as I wasn't there, I can't judge the performance. But before we accept "the case of D. D. Home," to which he refers, as evidence for the existence of levitation, there are a few facts that should be mentioned to assist us in forming our judgment.

Daniel Dunglas Home—real name Hume—was a Scotch-American medium who followed the old precedent of writing a book which accused practically all mediums but D. D. Home of being frauds. He was alleged to have levitated during a séance on the evening of December 13, 1868, in a London apartment. The story is told with bated breath by many spiritualists and psychic researchers. The qualifying facts, however, are these:

(1) The sources disagree about several important facts concerning the levitation, such as the date and whether the moon was visible.

(2) The stunt is asserted to have been performed in almost total darkness, so unless the sitters had "paranormal" eyesight it is hard to see how anybody could have been sure of what Home was up to.

(3) There was a balcony outside the window through which the necromancer wafted out and in.

(4) Viscount Adair, the chief source and a convinced spiritualist, was a little dubious about the authenticity of the act.

(5) Subsequently Home performed a more practical miracle. He persuaded a rich widow that her husband's ghost wanted her to adopt Home and give him fifteen thousand dollars, and bequeath him an equal amount. Eventually she sued to get her money back, alleging undue influence, and also demanded costs. The judge decided that Home would have to give back the fifteen thousand dollars, but that anybody who was as big a sucker as the plaintiff did not deserve court costs as well.

Lest Mr. King think my skepticism a mere case of the myopia of obstinacy, let me say that if somebody will discover an easy and universal method of levitating ordinary suitcases on occasions when they have to be carried to and from trains, I will not only accept the miracle without further incredulous remarks, but will give the thaumaturgist free advice on how to patent his invention.—L. Sprague de Camp.

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After the war, somebody's going to put up a new house on that pretty rise of ground that overlooks the river bend just outside of the town line. Nothing elaborate. Just a pretty little house snuggled into the trees as though it belonged there.

Somebody else may buy the old Ward farm. There should be many a good day's hunting in those rolling fields and back through the woods over to the State road.

Yes, somebody's going to buy it. Somebody's always coming along, with a dream and a little money, and doing the things we'd promised ourselves *we'd* do someday.

But this time, why can't that "somebody" be *you*?

Look—suppose you put part of your pay into War Bonds each payday—not 10% or 15%, *but all you can.* And *keep* putting it away, week after week, payday after payday. Here's what happens:

Before you know it, you get so you hardly miss that money. And if you do miss it, you've got something better to replace it: the knowledge that you, personally, are helping to insure a steady flow of planes and tanks and guns to the men who fight. The knowledge that you, personally, have toed the mark and are helping to win the war.

Then, one of these days, when peace has come again, the money you've put away starts coming back to you. And bringing *more* money with it—you get *four* dollars for every three you put in!

When that day comes, *you* can get out your pencil and start figuring just what kind of house you'll put on the river bend.

But to make sure that day *does* come, you'd better do this: get out your pencil right now and start figuring, not how *little* you can save in War Bonds, but *how much.* Chances are, you've done your bit and are doing it right now. But don't stop there! Raise your sights—*do your best!*

YOU'VE DONE YOUR BIT.. NOW DO YOUR BEST!

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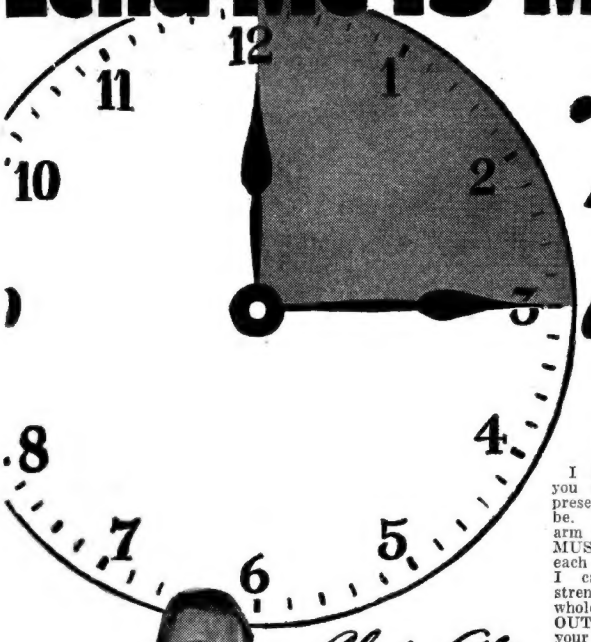

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

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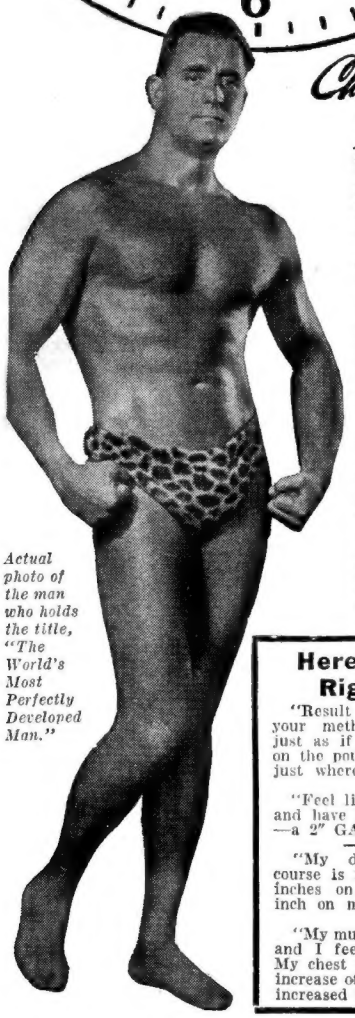
Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension,"* the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!



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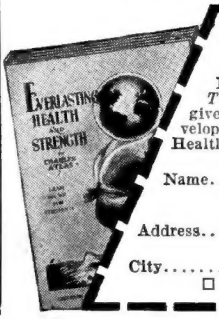

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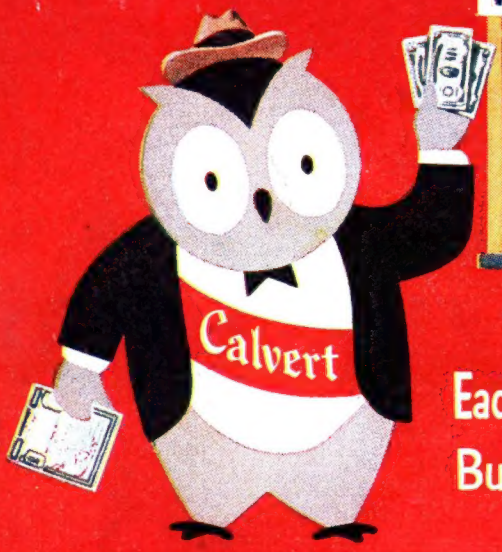

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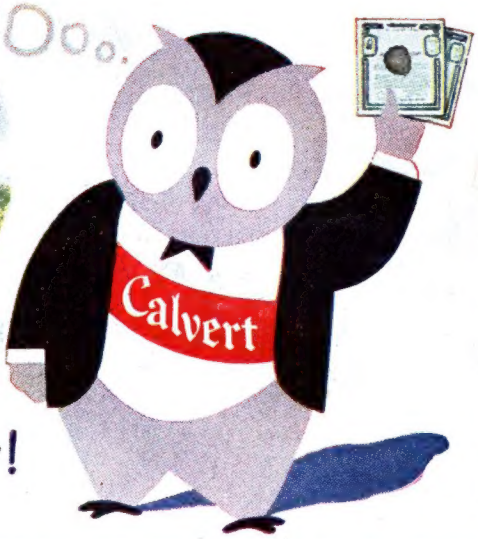

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